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## *Organic vs. Mechanic. Notes on the History of an Antithesis*<sup>\*</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The contrast between organic and mechanic arose as part of the reactions against the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. It ran throughout the 19<sup>th</sup>, it fuelled “Romantic” reactions to Newtonian science and the antithesis between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*. This contrast is still evident, to a greater or lesser extent, in many of the present criticisms of industrial society and technology. There is an interesting continuity between the arguments used by the early critics of what Carlyle would call the «age of machines» and some of the arguments and ways of thinking that are current today. The paper is devoted to stress this continuity by considering some representative authors, including Burke, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Ruskin, Sombart, Spengler, Scheler, T. Mann. Their interactions with political and social thought are also discussed.

### KEYWORDS

Technology, Industrial Revolution, nature, science, organicism

### 1. *Introduction*

Technology is perhaps the most evident aspect of present-day life. However, or because of this, it is under concentric attack from many sides: philosophers denouncing its de-humanizing effects, economists urging that we should rethink our notion of development and take a step back, ‘green’ scientists searching for ‘clean’ energy sources, critics of the Western way of life (and defenders of native cultures of America, Africa or Asia), opponents of capitalist industrialism, environmentalists fighting against pollution and unrestrained exploitation of nature, humanists wishing a return to more humane values, utopian thinkers, nostalgic admirers of rural life, Arcadists, catastrophists... These diverse, and differently motivated, criticisms, irrespective of whether they are right or wrong (this does not concern us

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\* This essay is dedicated to Paolo Rossi, *in memoriam*, who taught that intellectuals should pay attention to the works of the hands as well as those of the head, to machines as well as philosophies; for technology *is* thinking, and as ambiguous, fascinating and challenging as the world of ideas.

here), may reveal, on closer scrutiny, an underlying tendency to involve a large part of Western modernity as it emerged during the Industrial Revolution of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nothing new under the sun: technology-based industry and its consequences on human life, have provoked opposition from the beginning. To be sure, the language in which criticisms have been raised since then has varied, and new arguments have been added, especially since sensitivity to environmental issues has become a major concern for many educated people. However, a historian of ideas cannot but be impressed by continuities as well as by discontinuities. This is all the more true if discourses on technology are examined in connection with political attitudes. Early reactions to the Industrial Revolution and the coming of ‘machinery’ on a large scale were often all of a piece with reactions to another epoch-making event, the French Revolution. Modern science, too, has usually been included among the defendants: as Paolo Rossi (1989) remarked, Galileo has been repeatedly brought to court during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Words, the images they convey and the unconscious suggestions they drag along with them, can be revealing. Early critics of the two revolutions frequently used words such as ‘mechanism’ and ‘mechanical’ in a depreciatory sense, to refer to the new order of things, to which they opposed views of society they portrayed as ‘living’, ‘vital’ or ‘organic’. It is worth inquiring whether and, if so, to what extent this imagery has left traces in subsequent intellectual life in Europe. There are hints it has. After all, one of the most eloquent critics of industrialism and technology in today’s globalized world, Serge Latouche, describes this world as the “Megamachine”.

This paper does not dare to narrate the whole story. Nor does it claim to be particularly original. It merely aims to highlight some of the uses that were made of ‘organic’, ‘mechanical’ and related words and concepts by critics of modernity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It also brings together useful materials for a broader study of the intersections between attitudes towards nature, values, society, politics, science and technology (all of them taken in a large sense), which I hope to pursue in the future. This paper is therefore a step towards a discussion of issues that are still topical today. I am convinced that history—indeed, dear old history of ideas—has much to contribute to present debates. By showing continuities as well as discontinuities, recurrences as well as transformations, this paper puts these debates in perspective, unmasking undeclared assumptions lying behind competing opinions, as well as their unnoticed implications.

## 2. *Against Newton*

As is well known, a general reaction against the Enlightenment took place towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and was a major component of the Romantic<sup>1</sup> atmosphere, especially in Germany. German *Naturphilosophie* was characterised by a revival of anti-empiricism, anti-mechanism, anti-utilitarianism, and, above all, anti-materialism. ‘Living’, ‘organic’, ‘animated’ became flags signalling good philosophy and science. Such an influential philosopher as Schelling not only gave the ‘organism’ methodological and metaphysical priority over ‘mechanism’, but he also interpreted the universe as an integrated and functional living whole, ‘animated’ by conflicting polar forces and *Potenzen* (Poggi 2000, Pinkard 2008).

Anti-Newtonianism was a major component of much of *Naturphilosophie*. It was shared even by authors that could hardly be labelled as romantic. Hegel rejected not only Newton’s idea of absolute space, his theory of light and (partly) his astronomical system, but also what he considered Newton’s tendency to reduce thinking to calculation and to confuse mathematical abstractions with physical forces and philosophical concepts. Hegel used the word ‘organism’ to refer to geological as well as biological wholes, and he did not refrain from drawing daring, Renaissance-style rather than Romantic, analogies between them.<sup>2</sup>

Goethe did not content himself with attacking Newton’s theory of light on the grounds that it ignored the active role played by the percipient subject. He went so far as to say that “attempting to get to know nature merely through artifices and instruments” was “the greatest disaster in modern physics”. He called Newton’s physics “the pathology of experimental physics”, and he hoped “to liberate the phenomena once and for all from the gloom of the empirico-mechanico-dogmatic torture chamber”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I will use this term throughout in an avowedly generic way, for want of a better one.

<sup>2</sup> For instance: “Just as springs are the lungs and secretory glands for the Earth’s process of evaporation, so are volcanoes the Earth’s liver, in that they represent the Earth’s spontaneous generation of heat within itself” (*Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, § 341, *Zusatz*. In 1851, Gustav Theodor Fechner counted some fifty analogies between the organic body and the Earth (Fechner 1851, p. 1). As late as 1922 the historian Ernst Troeltsch discussed the doctrines on history and society of Schelling, Savigny, Adam Müller, Otto von Guericke and other philosophers, historians, jurists and political thinkers under the heading ‘The Organologie der deutschen Schule’ (Troeltsch 1922, pp. 277-313).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Heller 1961, p. 20. According to Heller, Goethe showed “the potential *hubris*” inherent in the pursuits of modern science (p. 7). This may not be entirely accurate as

### 3. "Dark Satanic mills"

Newton was criticised in Britain, too. To William Blake's mind he formed with Bacon and Locke a sort of counter-Trinity responsible for mortifying imagination and ossifying the spiritual in man. Philosophy had been delivered into the hands of Locke and Newton by Urizen, Blake's Satan-like "Lord of the intellect" and abstract reason, the spirit of negation and separation.<sup>4</sup> A "lame philosophy"<sup>5</sup> restricted man to his ratiocinating self, as in a prison, depriving him of full vision, as in sleep: "May God us keep/ From single vision & Newton's sleep".<sup>6</sup> Rescue would come from imagination and poetry: the eye, as opposed to the intellect, is the organ through which man can see his organic connection with the universe ("We are led to Believe a Lie/ When we see not through the Eye").<sup>7</sup> Newtonianism "petrifies all the Human Imagination into rock & sand", and "mathematical proportion" is the negation of "living proportion".

"... Cruel Works

Of many Wheels I view, Wheel without Wheel with cogs tyrannic  
Moving by compulsion each other: not as those in Eden: which  
Wheel after Wheel in freedom revolve in harmony & peace."<sup>8</sup>

"Satanic wheels" in the heavens, "dark Satanic mills" on the earth. For the mechanical philosophy of Locke and Newton has materialized in industry, which is transforming soul and life into furnaces and machines, as Urizen's sons transformed the "arts of life" into the "arts of death".<sup>9</sup> And man, with his reason, is severed from the source of his and all living energy, and is now an "unorganised" particle in a mechanical universe.

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regards Goethe's own attitude, but it captures the spirit of many 20<sup>th</sup> century opponents of 'quantitative' (Galilean, Newtonian) science, then and in more recent times.

<sup>4</sup> "Till a philosophy of Five Senses was complete/ Urizen wept & gave it into the hand of Newton & Locke" (*Africa*, lines 16-17, in Blake 1965, p. 66). Urizen is opposed by Los, spirit of poetry, prophecy and creation: "... I will not reason/ nor compare: my duty is to create", he says in *Jerusalem*.

<sup>5</sup> *Auguries of Innocence*, line 106, *ibid.*, p. 483.

<sup>6</sup> Letter of November 22, 1802, in Blake 1980, p. 46. Cf. "But Urizen laid in a stony sleep/ Unorganiz'ed, rent from Eternity" (*The Book of Urizen* (1794), Chapter III, in Blake 1965, p. 73).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 485-486.

<sup>8</sup> *Europe*, in Blake 1965, p. 314; *Jerusalem*, Chapter I, lines 17-20, *ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>9</sup> *Jerusalem*, Chapter I, line 37; Chapter III, line 16; *Milton*, Preface (*ibid.*, pp. 156, 214).

4. “*Communion with the spirit of nature*”

Samuel Coleridge, a disciple of Schelling’s, is a blatant instance of the fact that hostility to Newtonian science could be all of a piece with the rejection of materialism, atheism, hedonism, natural rights and the new commercial spirit: in a word, of the world issued from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. He pleaded for a “metaphysics of quality” that would dispel the “philosophy of death”, that is the “mechanic philosophy” which had “infected the modern mind”<sup>10</sup> and reduced everything to “a mere juxtaposition of corpuscles”.<sup>11</sup> Nature is not “an immense heap of little things”;<sup>12</sup> it is a living being, and man’s spirit “has the same ground with nature”.<sup>13</sup> But modern man is out of tune with nature: “we have purchased a few brilliant inventions at the loss of all communion with the spirit of nature”. The good old world, instead, was living and organic, as it was pervaded by spiritual value and sanctioned by God. It was also hierarchical: everything and everyone had their place in it. And now? We are witnessing the “neutralization of nature”, “the translation of a living world into a dead language” by abstract thinking. The faculty of the understanding, “which concerns itself exclusively with the quantities, qualities, and relations of particulars in time and space”, subsumes phenomena under “distinct kinds and sorts”, analyses and classifies them into abstract forms. As a consequence, “we think of ourselves as separated beings, and place nature in antithesis to the mind, as objects to subject, thing to thought, death to life”.<sup>14</sup> The understanding is raised above the faculty of reason, which is “the science of the universal, having the ideas of oneness and allness as its two elements or primary factors”, “the power by which we become possessed of principles”, “the knowledge of the laws as a whole considered as one”. Imagination is expelled from poetry; God has been expelled from creation by Descartes and Locke; religion and the sense of mystery are marginalised; workers are “mechanized into engines for the manufactory of new rich men” who treat “the remainder of population” as “lifeless engines”;<sup>15</sup> “social and hereditary privileges” are replaced by “a system of natural rights””, and “the wealth of nations [is] substituted for the well-being of nations and of man”.<sup>16</sup> In addition to that: “The mechanico-corpuscular theory raised to the

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<sup>10</sup> *The Statesman’s Manual*, quoted in Willey 1980, p.28.

<sup>11</sup> *The Friend*, also quoted in Willey 1980, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Letter of 14 Oct. 1797, *Collected Letters*, I, 349.

<sup>13</sup> Coleridge 1907, II, p. 258.

<sup>14</sup> *The Friend*, Essay XI, in *Complete Works*, II, p. 469.

<sup>15</sup> *Regrets and Apprehensions*, in *Complete Works*, VI, p. 64; cf. *Notebooks*, II, 2557.

<sup>16</sup> *The Friend*, quoted in Willey 1980, p. 28.

title of the mechanical philosophy, and espoused as a revolution in philosophy by the actors and partisans of the (so-called) Revolution in the State [...] A state of nature, or the Ourang Outang theology of the origin of the human race, substituted for the first ten chapters of the Book of Genesis; rights of nature for the duties and privileges of citizens; idealess facts, misnamed proofs from history, grounds of experience, and thelike, for principles and the insight derived from them [...] The true historical feeling, the immortal life of the nation, generation linked to generation by faith, freedom, heraldry, and ancestral fame, languishing and giving place to the superstition of wealth and newspaper reputation”.<sup>17</sup>

### 5. *Work in the “Mechanical Age”*

In a famous essay on *Signs of the Times* (1829), another critic of early industrialism, Thomas Carlyle, contrasted the old way of life with what he called “the Age of Machinery” or “Mechanical Age”. Society had been separated from life. Factory work removed man from the all-important contact with nature. “It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole individual might, forwards, teaches and practices the great art of adapting means to ends. Nothing is done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance”. To be sure, “we war with rude Nature; and, by our resistless engines, come off always victorious, and loaded with spoils”,<sup>18</sup> but “the mechanical genius of our time” pervades all aspects of our lives: “Men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitution - for mechanism of one sort or another, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn in mechanism, and are of a mechanical character.”<sup>19</sup>

As a result, “the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion, all which have a truly vital and *infinite* character” have been removed to the background. The arts and sciences are now pursued in institutions, laboratories and schools, but they were formed “by spontaneous growth, in the free soil and sunshine of Nature”, by the inner dynamics of man’s spirit, not mechanics.<sup>20</sup> “This faith in Mechanism, in

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<sup>17</sup> *The Constitution of Church and State* (1829), in *Complete Works*, VI, pp. 64-65.

<sup>18</sup> *Signs of the Times*, ed. by Shilling (in Carlyle 1888), p. 233.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

the all-importance of physical things, is in every age the common refuge of Weakness and blind Discontent; of all who believe, as many will ever do, that man's true good lies without him, not within [...] This deep paralysed subjection to physical objects come not from Nature, but from our own unwise mode of viewing Nature."<sup>21</sup>

"Motive-grinders, and Mechanical Profit-and-loss Philosophers" have brought on "sick ophthalmia and hallucination".<sup>22</sup> We construe society as "a machine", in which "cash-payment" is "the sole nexus of man with man". *Laissez faire* is the social and economic expression of the mechanical philosophy. It generates chaos, by destroying the "vital essence" of society and atomizing social relations, i.e. by insulating the individuals from each other and from themselves. It is a "social gangrene" and a "gospel of despair".<sup>23</sup> However, true society is necessarily organic; it is a tissue of "organic filaments" linking men, and generations, with one another.<sup>24</sup> The present system cannot last, for it is against nature. We can therefore "glance timidly into the immense Industrial Ages", which are "as yet all inorganic, and in a quite pulpy condition, requiring desperately to harden themselves into some organism",<sup>25</sup> and be confident that an industrial *and* "organic" society will come out of the chaos of competition. Safety lies in work: for him that will continue to work, and thereby learn "Laws, Obligations sacred as Man's life itself" and "far deeper than Supply-and-demand", "behold, Nature is on his side", and he shall "prosper with noble rewards".<sup>26</sup> There is room for optimism: "Gradually, assaulted from beneath and from above, the Stygian mud-deluge of Laissez-faire, Supply-and-demand, Cash-payment the one Duty, will abate on all hands; and the everlasting mountain-tops, and secure rock-foundations that reach to the centre of the world, and rest on nature's self, will again emerge, to found on, and to build on. When mammon-worshippers hare and there begin to be God-worshippers, and bipeds-of-prey become men, and there is a Soul felt once more in the huge-pulsing elephantine mechanic Animalism of this Earth, it will be again a blessed Earth."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 250-251.

<sup>22</sup> *Sartor Resartus* (1831), ed. by Shilling (in Carlyle 1888), Book II, Chapter VII, p. 113.

<sup>23</sup> *Past and Present* (1843), ed. Shilling (in Carlyle 1888), Book III, Chapt. II, p. 126; X, pp. 161, 167.

<sup>24</sup> *Sartor Resartus*, cit., Book III, Chapt. VII, pp. 170, 193-197.

<sup>25</sup> *Past and Present*, cit., Book IV, Chapt. I, p. 214.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, Book III, Chapt. IX, p. 160.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, Book IV, Chapt. VIII, p. 252.



Work plays a paramount role in Carlyle's rethinking of modernity and hopes for the future. He waxes lyrical in his celebration of it. Work is a spiritual energy that pervades the universe. Through it, the heart of man is intimately connected with the heart of the whole, and can be reintegrated in the life of nature. Work is "the voice of God", which has not remained silent even in the last two "atheistic centuries". It is the hard way to salvation, a duty and a sacrifice to universal order. Only he who works can see light and radiate it. But this exacts the re-awakening of the self by a descent into the "inner man", in search of the soul: "Thou must descend to the Mothers, to the Manes, and Hercules-like long suffer and labour there, wouldst thou emerge with victory into the sunlight". In short, "work is worship".<sup>28</sup> A gigantic struggle waged by each individual will enable mankind to go beyond mundane limitations and to ascend to the sky, triumphing over the apocalypse of chaos, division, decay and conflict.

By making work the pivot of a heroic, Promethean perspective, Carlyle reconciles himself with the industrial age: it is impossible to return to the organic world of heretofore, where men did not act out of their interest but on the spur of unconscious drives, artistic intuitions and internalised duties. Carlyle, too, regrets the Middle Ages, when everything and everyone had their assigned place in a spiritual cosmos. However, he believes it possible to redeem the industrial society from its evils (individualism, greed, the law of the strongest, *laissez faire*, disorganisation) through a moral transfiguration of capitalism. He then feels entitled to teach workers to listen to nature's and God's command, and to submit to it, by forming a sort of militant organisation of labour forces towards an ideal mission. The reward for such subordination will be individual and social salvation. For men are not saved by laws, elections, reforms or, worse, social agitations, unless the social order is pervaded by a religious spirit. It is through work that the sacred order will be instated on the earth, and that man will reach the Promised Land. Carlyle prophesies a spiritual, not a material regeneration. Its alternative is simply death: "There will a radical universal alteration of your regimen and life take place; there will a most agonising divorce between you and your chimeras, luxuries and falsities take place; a most toilsome, all-but impossible 'return to nature', and her veracities and her integrities, take place; that so the inner fountains of life may again begin, like eternal Light-fountains, to irradiate and purify your bloated, swollen, foul existence, drawing nigh, as at present to nameless death! Either death, or else all this will take place."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 172, 176, 200).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

6. *The workman as “a component of a mechanical system”*

Carlyle’s fight to re-spiritualise the world of machines was, in his eyes, all the more necessary because others were attempting to do quite the opposite. Josiah Wedgwood, of pottery fame, attempted to organise his factory so as to “make such machines of the men as cannot err”.<sup>30</sup> And the British chemist and industrialist Andrew Ure (1778-1857) wrote in his *Philosophy of manufactures* (1835) that it is the workers that must adapt themselves to the machine, and become “organs of a vast automaton”: “The term *Factory*, in technology, designates the combined operation of many orders of work-people, adult and young, in tending with assiduous skill a system of productive machines continuously impelled by a central power [...] I conceive that this title, in its strictest sense, involves the idea of a vast automaton, composed of various mechanical and intellectual organs, acting in uninterrupted concert for the production of a common object, all of them being subordinated to a self-regulated moving force.”

The mill-owner should therefore “organize his moral machinery on equally sound principles with his mechanical”. These principles boil down to one: regularity. It must replace muscular work, “which is by its nature fitful and capricious”, and generates “desultory habits of work” (Ure 1835, pp. 13-15). This cannot even be achieved by a “mechanical genius” alone: “It required, in fact, a man of a Napoleon nerve and ambition, to subdue the refractory tempers of work-people accustomed to irregular paroxysms of diligence” (*ibid.*, p. 16). Personal craftsmanship can be dangerous. The solution is a mechanical, self-regulating system: “[...] whenever a process requires peculiar dexterity and steadiness of hand, it is withdrawn as soon as possible from the *cunning* workman, who is prone to irregularities of many kinds, and it is placed in charge of a peculiar mechanism, so self-regulating, that a child may superintend it [...]. The principle of the factory system then is, to substitute mechanical science for hand skill, and the partition of a process into its essential constituents, for the division or graduation of labour among artisans” (*ibid.*, pp. 19-20).

It is almost impossible to “convert” people that have passed the age of puberty “into useful factory hands”, for they have contracted peasants’ or craftsmen’ habits, and human nature is, unfortunately, what it is. This is why the mill-owner is strongly recommended to replace, whenever possible, specialized and costly human components with more ordinary, pliable and reliable ones. “By the infirmity of human nature it happens, that the more

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Thompson 1964, p. 351.

skilful the workman, the more self-willed and intractable he is apt to become, and, of course, the less fit a component of a mechanical system, in which, by occasional irregularities, he may do great damages to the whole. The grand object therefore of the modern manufacturer is, through the union of capital and science, to reduce the task of his work-people to the exercise of vigilance and dexterity,--faculties, when concentrated to one process, speedily brought to perfection in the young [...] It is, in fact, the constant aim and tendency of every improvement in machinery to supersede human labour altogether, or to diminish its cost, by substituting the industry of women and children for that of men; or that of ordinary labourers, for trained artisans.” (*ibid.*, pp. 20-21, 23)

## 6. *Polluting machinery*

John Ruskin did not share Carlyle’s worship of work as such. According to Ruskin, work, must not be a struggle against misery or for the subjugation of nature, nor a compulsive activity spurred by an acquisitive spirit; it must be a free creation, a joyful expression of the whole personality in a suitable natural and social environment. Ruskin put art far higher than labour, and his opposition to the industrial world was based on aesthetic as well as ethical reasons. But he, too, was inspired by the romantic belief in a fundamental affinity between nature and spirit. The same harmony that reigns in nature must reign in man, and its human manifestation is in art. Art must imitate nature, Ruskin says, but what he means by nature is a far cry from any “Newtonian machine” ruled by mathematical laws. It is, instead, an all-pervasive vital energy producing a mysterious harmony, which can be captured by the imagination, for the intellect is able to grasp logical and mechanical relations only. Nature is a web of infinite and indeterminate correspondences, a vivid representation of which is conveyed by the “mist effect” in Turner’s pictures.

Creative energies can produce art only in fully developed beings living in a healthy environment. Bad social conditions pervert the divinity of man,<sup>31</sup> and no art is possible where nature is destroyed, waste produced, social injustice legalised and the lowest passions encouraged. Unfortunately, such is the case in modern society, which is not a community of cooperating and interdependent individuals bound to each other by the “law of help”, but a state of anarchy where men are driven only by “the great mechanical

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<sup>31</sup> During the 1850s, man replaced nature in Ruskin’s thought as the highest manifestation of the divine. This change was probably due to his progressive dislike for the mortification of man he found in the Gospels.

impulses of the age”.<sup>32</sup> “A pure and holy state of anything [...] is that in which all its parts are helpful or consistent. They may or may not be homogeneous. The highest or organic purities are composed of many elements in an entirely helpful state. The highest and first law of the universe – and the other name of life is [...] ‘help’. The other name of death is ‘separation’. Government and cooperation are in all things and eternally the laws of life. Anarchy and competition, eternally, and in all things, the laws of death.”<sup>33</sup>

*Laissez faire* is the social and economic manifestation of the mechanical impulses that atomize social relations, spoil beauty, and pervert vitality by nourishing the foolish desire to “kill space and time”, to do ever more and more hastily. Machines make automata of workmen.<sup>34</sup> Cities have become places “in which the object of men is not life, but labour; [...] in which existence becomes mere transition, and every creature is only one atom in a drift of human dust, and current of interchangeable particles circulating here by tunnels, and here by tubes in the air”.<sup>35</sup> “Mechanism” (which in Ruskin’s mind embraces modern science<sup>36</sup> and the belief in progress, rationalism and utilitarianism in philosophy and associationism in psychology, as well as industrialism, urbanization, overcrowding and pollution) is the result of a metaphysical perversion: man’s arrogant severance of himself from the rest of the world, both animate and inanimate, and from the vital energy of love that pervades all things and makes it possible for them to communicate with one another. “Gambling and stealing” are the main activities of the Mammon-worshipping merchant.<sup>37</sup> Ruskin traces the origin of the “acquisitive spirit” and the ethics of “getting on” back to Protestantism (significantly, an enemy of art); he does not shrink from describing the “honest but not liberally minded Protestant” as more hypocritical than the

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<sup>32</sup> *Modern Painters*, vol. 3, in *Works*, V, p. 380.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, in *Works*, VII, p. 207.

<sup>34</sup> According to Ruskin, machines can be useful only in rural life. He does not believe that mechanization is irreversible.

<sup>35</sup> *The Study of Architecture* (1865) *Works*, 19, p. 24. Carlyle defined London as “that monstrous tuberosity of civilized life” (*Sartor Resartus*, cit., Book III, Chapter VI, p. 167).

<sup>36</sup> Science tends to stifle man’s natural desire for contemplation, to chill and subdue sentiments, and to reduce all things to “atoms and numbers”. It is to be doubted whether an optician, however religious, enjoys the view of the rainbow more than an ignorant peasant does (*Modern Painters*, vol. III, in *Works*, 5, pp. 386-387). To Ruskin the true science of economy is something quite different from “the bastard science” that goes under this name: it is the science that teaches to work for the things “that lead to life”, not for those that lead to destruction (*Unto This Last*, 1860, in *Works*, 17, p. 85). It will be remembered that Carlyle called economics “the dismal science”.

<sup>37</sup> *A Joy Forever (The Political Economy of Art)*, 1857, in *Works*, 16, p. 138)

Roman Catholic, nor from defining the Protestant capitalist “a little porker”.<sup>38</sup>

One of the most visible consequences of the mechanical mentality is pollution, moral and physical, which Ruskin denounces indignantly, with plenty of details, and with his anger at injured innocence often taking on apocalyptic tones (Fitch 1982). Industry does not produce wealth, but “illth” (Ruskin’s coinage). It has destroyed the landscape, poisoned air, water and earth, and turned every river of England into a sewage: English babies are now being christened with “filth”.<sup>39</sup> According to Ruskin, polluting means, literally, desecrating and profaning.

Ruskin’s ideal is the “organic” society consisting of small rural communities based on the family and on parental relations, like in Ancient Greece and the Middle Ages. Like Coleridge and Carlyle, Ruskin would welcome the intervention of the State to restore organic society. This appears to be a strange contradiction in authors who rejected Enlightenment rationalism and ‘utilitarianism’ on the grounds that they favoured “artificial” planning and social engineering disruptive of traditional ‘organic’ society. There is also a contradiction between these authors’ celebration of spontaneous growth, creative freedom and unrestrained vitality on the one hand, and their rejection of *laissez faire* and so much of modernity as “unnatural” on the other hand; it almost seems as if what they described as the present social chaos were not as spontaneously generated as the organic order of the Middle Ages! It has been pointed out that there is an “unresolved conflict within [Ruskin’s] thought and within the Romantic movement between a dynamic organicism of free energy and a static organicism of surface form and order”.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Protestantism: the Pleasure of Truth* (1884) in *Works*, 33, p. 509.

<sup>39</sup> *Fors Clavigera. Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* (1871-1884), in *Works*, 27, p. 92.

<sup>40</sup> Sherburne 1972, p. 84. A similar point was made by Basil Willey (1986, esp. Chapt. XI) with respect to the uses of ‘nature’ by some representative thinkers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Both reformers and conservatives appealed to nature; the former, however, took nature in the dynamic sense of “what things might become” (*natura naturans*), whereas the latter stood on the side of nature as “things as they now are or have become” (*natura naturata*). However, as Willey rightly remarked, it was possible to be “progressive” and yet to be also a “primitivist”, if the true reform one contemplated was one leading back to a lost paradise. Confusion would arise when reformers appealing to nature (whether they looked back to a blessed past or forward to a desirable future) regarded existing institutions as “unnatural”. The question they did not answer (nor ask) was: how comes nature, the very model of goodness and teacher of mankind, became so inefficient as to produce unnatural things? Analogously, conservatives and reactionaries like Burke (see below) did not answer (nor ask) the question: if nature is so generous as to

### 7. *The living partnership between generations*

From Menenius Agrippa's times, organic metaphors and analogies have played an important role in social and political thinking. In general, it can be said that they were instrumental in stressing the importance of the whole over its parts and of central government over local political bodies and particular interests (Coker 1910; Becker and Barnes 1961; Cohen 1993). As such, they seem hardly compatible with a liberal view of social life, let alone *laissez faire* ideologies.<sup>41</sup> After the French Revolution, organismic views of society and the State were opposed to the contract theories which were thought to have inspired reformers and revolutionaries and to nourish the belief in universal rights. Juridical systems, class relationships and administrative apparatuses were said to be integral parts of the organic whole represented by the body of the nation living through the generations. Being such, they could not be manipulated at will. Any attempts to impose an artificial order on the organism would be arbitrary and violent; they were the product of intellectualistic and abstract, in a word, 'mechanical', thinking.

The Irish politician Edmund Burke gave these ideas an 'organic' and influential form in his eloquent and highly influential attack on the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. He warned his readers lest they got "entangled in the mazes of metaphysic sophistry which urges for a decomposition of the whole civil and political mass for the purpose of originating a new civil order out of the first elements of society". Change is indeed necessary for the conservation of society, but it must be achieved without losing "the bond of union" in "the ancient edifice"; it must not "dissolve the whole fabric", but "regenerate the deficient part of the old constitution through the parts which were not impaired". The English—God bless them—held on to these commonsensical principles even during their Revolution. "They kept these old parts exactly as they were, that the part recovered might be suited to them. They acted by the ancient organized states in the shape of their old organization, and not by the organic *moleculae* of a disbanded people. At no time, perhaps, did the sovereign legislature manifest a more tender regard to that fundamental principle of than at the time of the Revolution, when it [British constitutional policy]

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have produced the existing institutions **over time**, through conflicts and revolutions, why not leave her free to go on bettering them indefinitely by the same means?

<sup>41</sup> One major exception is represented by Herbert Spencer. On him, see Peel 1971 and La Vergata 1995.

deviated from the direct line of hereditary succession. The crown was carried somewhat out of the line in which it had before moved, but the new line was derived from the same stock. It was still a line of hereditary descent, still an hereditary descent in the same blood, though an hereditary descent qualified with Protestantism. When the legislature altered the direction, but kept the principle, they showed that they held it inviolable.” Burke appealed to common sense, empiricism, practical sense and the force of history and history. “The science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it – he said – is, like every other experimental science, not to be taught *a priori*”. “The science of government being therefore so practical in itself and intended for such practical purposes—a matter which requires experience, and even more experience than any person can gain in his whole life, however sagacious and observing he may be—it is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes.”

By what folly, then, alter “the mechanism of civil institutions” all of a sudden? And why talking abstractly of universal rights? “What is the use of discussing a man's abstract right to food or medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them. In that deliberation I shall always advise to call in the aid of the farmer and the physician rather than the professor of metaphysics”. Furthermore, “these metaphysic rights”, when they are applied to “common life”, are inevitably far from producing their intended effects: “the nature of man is intricate”, and “the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity”. These principles, “like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium, are by the laws of nature refracted from their straight line”; they “undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections that it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction”.<sup>42</sup> Rights are not a matter of either

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<sup>42</sup> Here is the full passage: “These metaphysic rights entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium, are by the laws of nature refracted from their straight line. Indeed, in the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns the primitive rights of men undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections that it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction. The nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity; and, therefore, no simple disposition or direction of power can be suitable either to man's nature or to the quality of his affairs. When I hear the simplicity of contrivance aimed at and boasted of in any new political constitutions, I am at no loss to decide that the artificers are grossly ignorant of their trade or totally negligent of their duty. The simple governments are fundamentally defective, to say no worse of them. If you were to contemplate society in but one point of view, all these simple modes of polity

black or white. “The pretended rights of these theorists are all extremes; and in proportion as they are metaphysically true, they are morally and politically false. The rights of men are in a sort of middle, incapable of definition, but not impossible to be discerned. The rights of men in governments are their advantages; and these are often in balances between differences of good, in compromises sometimes between good and evil, and sometimes between evil and evil. Political reason is a computing principle: adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing, morally and not metaphysically or mathematically, true moral denominations.”

Finally, abstract theorizing cannot be translated into practice unless by violence: “this barbarous philosophy, which is the offspring of coldhearts and muddy understandings, and which is as void of solid wisdom as it is destitute of all taste and elegance, laws are to be supported only by their own terrors and by the concern which each individual may find in them from his own private speculations or can spare to them from his own private interests. In the groves of their academy, at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows. Nothing is left which engages the affections on the part of the commonwealth. On the principles of this mechanic philosophy, our institutions can never be embodied, if I may use the expression, in persons, so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment”.<sup>43</sup>

To the mechanical way of thinking and view of society, Burke opposes his own view of society as a permanent body composed of transient parts. “But one of the first and most leading principles on which the commonwealth and the laws are consecrated is, lest the temporary possessors and life-renters in it, unmindful of what they have received from their ancestors or of what is due to their posterity, should act as if they were the entire masters, that they should not think it among their rights to cut off the entail or commit waste on the inheritance by destroying at their pleasure the whole original fabric of their society, hazarding to leave to those who come after them a ruin instead of an habitation — and teaching these successors as little to respect their contrivances as they had themselves respected the institutions of their forefathers. By this unprincipled facility of changing the state as often, and as much, and in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions, the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken. No one generation could link with the other. Men would become

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are infinitely captivating. In effect each would answer its single end much more perfectly than the more complex is able to attain all its complex purposes. But it is better that the whole should be imperfectly and anomalously answered than that, while some parts are provided for with great exactness, others might be totally neglected or perhaps materially injured by the over-care of a favorite member.”

<sup>43</sup> Burke 1826, p. 152.



little better than the flies of a summer [...] And thus the commonwealth itself would, in a few generations, crumble away, be disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality, and at length dispersed to all the winds of heaven”.<sup>44</sup>

Changes must therefore be very slow. They cannot be the work of “an assembly which glories in performing in a few months the work of ages”. Only when “time is among the assistants” in political operations can the “long succession of generations” constituting the nation “be admitted into some share in the councils which are so deeply to affect them”. For “if justice requires this, the work itself requires the aid of more minds than one age can furnish”.<sup>45</sup>

Burke does admit that a contract lies at the origin of society, but he reinterprets it in such a way as to empty it of any significance for political change inspired by the theory of universal rights. What derives from the contract, he argues, is not a “partnership” that can be altered at will by the contractors, but one that has a transgenerational, spiritual value, and should therefore be inviolable. “Society is indeed a contract. Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure — but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico, ortobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence, because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>45</sup> Here is the full passage: “A process of this kind is slow. It is not fit for an assembly which glories in performing in a few months the work of ages. Such a mode of reforming, possibly, might take up many years. Without question it might; and it ought. It is one of the excellences of a method in which time is amongst the assistants, that its operation is slow and in some cases almost imperceptible. Where the great interests of mankind are concerned through a long succession of generations, that succession ought to be admitted into some share in the councils which are so deeply to affect them. If justice requires this, the work itself requires the aid of more minds than one age can furnish. It is from this view of things that the best legislators have been often satisfied with the establishment of some sure, solid, and ruling principle in government — a power like that which some of the philosophers have called a plastic nature; and having fixed the principle, they have left it afterwards to its own operation.”

clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place. This law is not subject to the will of those who by an obligation above them, and infinitely superior, are bound to submit their will to that law. The municipal corporations of that universal kingdom are not morally at liberty at their pleasure, and on their speculations of a contingent improvement, wholly to separate and tear asunder the bands of their subordinate community and to dissolve it into an unsocial, uncivil, unconnected chaos of elementary principles. It is the first and supreme necessity only, a necessity that is not chosen but chooses, a necessity paramount to deliberation, that admits no discussion and demands no evidence, which alone can justify a resort to anarchy. This necessity is no exception to the rule, because this necessity itself is a part, too, of that moral and physical disposition of things to which man must be obedient by consent or force; but if that which is only submission to necessity should be made the object of choice, the law is broken, nature is disobeyed, and the rebellious are outlawed, cast forth, and exiled from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow.”<sup>46</sup>

It is interesting to note that Burke’s “partnership” was translated as *Gemeinschaft* by Friedrich von Gentz, another unremitting critic of the French Revolution, and a source for subsequent anti-Enlightenment German writers (Losurdo, 1991, p. 191). Burke’s influence on German contemporary and later conservative thinkers cannot be underestimated.<sup>47</sup> And yet, his language was going to be spoken in France too.<sup>48</sup>

### 8. *Positivistic organicism*

Like his one-time mentor Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte wanted to “re-organise” French (and European) society, which to his mind had been torn

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185.

<sup>47</sup> Some of them went so far as to praise him for being “more German than British” (Losurdo 1991, p. 191).

<sup>48</sup> As is well known, in 1887 the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies introduced a famous distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*: the former “is a living organism, whereas the latter should be understood as a mechanical aggregate and artifact” (Tönnies 1935, p. 5).

to pieces by the Revolution and the anarchy that followed.<sup>49</sup> A society, he said, is “organic” only when its components were bound into a “spontaneous harmony” by moral unity and a shared, coherent system of beliefs. The *old régime* was organic, but it was based on intrinsically weak, unscientific, beliefs. The new industrial society would combine sound, positive beliefs with the moral unity typical of medieval society, which Comte admired. He derived his concept of organic society from anti-revolutionary thinkers, and fellow admirers of the Middle Ages, such as de Maistre and de Bonald (Rossi 1982, pp. 20-21). The use the latter made of the idea of organic society bears many analogies with the doctrines of many German jurists and political philosophers (see below). But Comte looked at the future more than at the past. He prophesized, and campaigned for, a “positive society” where industrialists and workers would cooperate under the guidance of scientists; conflicts would be solved by the common moral worship of the collective being, Humanity (Manuel 1962). Throughout his life He was convinced that in a scientifically organised society democracy was, more than dangerous, illusory: scientific truth, he said, is never established by casting ballots. As time went by, his political ideas took on an increasingly authoritarian turn . It is no wonder, then, that his followers, even those who criticised him on many points, often resorted to “organism” and the “living body” in their attack on the heritage of the Revolution and in their critique of democracy. However, as Zeev Sternhell (2006) has shown, authors such as Ernest Renan or Hippolyte Taine were influenced by Burke as well. Renan, for instance, used the same imagery when he stated that inequality is sanctioned by both nature and tradition. “Society is a hierarchy. All individuals are noble and sacred, and all beings (even animals) have rights; but all of them are not equal, all are limbs of a great body, an immense organism that realizes a divine work. Denying this divine work is the fault which French democracy so easily incurs [...] You abolish humanity if you do not grant that whole classes must live for the glory and pleasure of other classes [...] It is unjust that a man should be sacrificed for another man, but it is not unjust that all should be submitted to the higher work that realizes humanity”.<sup>50</sup>

So did Taine: society is a “living body” shaped by countless generations over the course of the centuries. It is a product of history, not will. Their members are far from being independent from one another, and from “facing one another for the first time to make a contract”, for it is with their ancestors that they form a nation. An individual is like “a cell in an

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<sup>49</sup> According to Comte, the destructive forces had been first unleashed by the Protestant Reform, which disrupted the unity of the feudal and theocratic system. On the relations between Comte’s social theory and biology see Greene 1962.

<sup>50</sup> Renan 1869, pp. 242, 246, 248.

organism”, and “a cell is born, survives, develops and achieves its ends only by means of the health of the whole body”. Then there followed a metaphor that was to be caught up with, as Sternhell remarks, by Maurice Barrès and other French nationalists: society is a tree “whose trunk, thickened by age, stores in its overlapping layers, in the folds of its knots, in the tangle of its branches, the immemorial sediments of the pith that has nourished it, and the stamp of the countless seasons it has lived through”.<sup>51</sup>

### 9. *Neither metaphors nor models*

It was particularly in Germany that organismic language and analogies carried an anti-liberal message.<sup>52</sup> To people such as the philosopher Johann Jacob Wagner and the jurists Adam Müller and Friedrich Karl von Savigny, phrases like ‘the living tradition of national customs’, or, to quote Coleridge again, “the immortal life of the nation, generation linked to generation by faith, freedom, heraldry, and ancestral fame”, were no mere metaphors. Customs and institutions *were* organs of a body living through history. The history of a nation was the life of a nation. And it was unique, as Herder had eloquently argued in his criticism of the abstract, rationalistic universalism of the Enlightenment: like all living things, cultures undergo an organic development. It was only too natural for other voices to adopt his views after the Revolution and Napoleon had shown the Germans the consequences of imposing alien principles upon a people in the name of universal Man. To mention only one of them, the physician, philosopher, religious and political thinker Franz von Baader advocated “dynamical” as opposed to “mechanical” philosophy (1809), and contrasted artificial, disruptive and regressive movement (*Revolution*) with the peaceful, orderly, steady, forward movement of society, which he called “Evolution” (*Evolution*). The latter was based on an inner drive, as in plants and animals developing from a seed or germ. The former was not a sudden acceleration of growth but a merely negative process. *Revolutionismus* was a negation of the

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted by Sternhell 2007, p. 300 (Italian translation of Sterhell 2006).

<sup>52</sup> Although this message was not necessarily a reactionary one. While stressing that “a neo-conservative reinterpretation of the concept of organism is characteristic of Late Romanticism”, Sturma (2008, p. 232) rightly points out that even the “retrospective view” of authors (like Müller, Friedrich Schlegel and Baader) idealizing the Christian Middle Ages “was still directed forward”. He concludes: “When the politics of Late Romanticism follows revisionary goals it can be described as revolutionary conservatism”.

laws of life, including social life, whereas *Evolutionismus* pointed out the right approach to politics (1834).<sup>53</sup>

Before going on, it is important to make some points:

1) Even when we are not in presence of fully articulated social or political theories, we must pay attention to general assumptions and images conditioning and channeling reflections on society and politics.

2) The recurrent appeal to tradition makes it evident that “organic” shaded into “historical” (and *vice versa*). No wonder that Coleridge and other advocates of the “German-Coleridgean doctrine” (J.S. Mill’s definition) lamented modern man’s loss of “the true historical feeling” and the consequent replacement of historical privileges with universal rights.

3) “Organic” did not mean “biological” in today’s sense, but “living” because “spiritually (or culturally) coherent” and “hierarchically organised”. With this in mind, it can be said that “organic” and “living” were used in a literal, *and metaphysical*, rather than metaphorical sense.<sup>54</sup>

4) In an organic society, spiritual values predominate over material and economic ones. Tensions between labourers and employers are solved

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<sup>53</sup> Baader 1831, 1834. It should be remembered that throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century the term ‘evolution’ meant what would later (after the early 1860s) be called ‘ontogeny’ or ‘embryological development’. It had been used by supporters of preformationist against epigenetic theories of generation. Therefore it inevitably conveyed the idea of an orderly and progressive process leading through gradual differentiation to the full maturity of a living thing. Significantly, Spencer used the word ‘progress’ to refer to both biological and social development in his early writings on these matters, although he rejected preformation: in his jargon, “the development of every organism is a passage from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous”. He later used, and popularized, ‘evolution’ in the same meaning in which he had used ‘progress’. His 1857 statement “Progress is the law of all development” was translated into “there are not several kinds of Evolution, but one Evolution going on everywhere after the same manner” (see La Vergata 1995).

<sup>54</sup> Such organicism must therefore not be confused with the use of social metaphors in biological theorizing by scientists like Claude Bernard, Rudolf Virchow, Oskar Hertwig, Charles Otis Whitman and William Morton Wheeler: see Schiller 1978, Mazzolini 1983, Weindling 1981, 1982, Mitman 1992, and the essays in Maasen *et al.* eds. 1995 (especially Mitman 1995 and Mitchell 1995). *A fortiori* it would be wrong to say that the authors we are dealing with here were borrowing *models* from the biological sciences. A model is an intellectual construct that is consciously articulated and employed for a heuristic purpose. Our authors were a far cry from this: their language was suggestive, not scientific in the modern sense; nor did they want it to be scientific. It must not be forgotten, however, that many German scientists set themselves a sort of duty of writing on bio-social matters in the spirit of their country’s typical *Staatsbiologie* tradition. The zoologist and holistic philosopher of biology Jacob von Uexküll’s *Staatsbiologie* (1920) represents one of the latest contribution to this tradition (Harrington 1996, Merker 2011).

through cooperation, subordination of individual interests to those of the whole, respect for hierarchy, sense of duty.

5) The State was not to be construed as an association based on utility, but as having a higher (often divine) purpose, embodied in an idea or unifying principle.

### 10. *Organicism and the Volk*

Since the wars against Napoleon, in Germany there had been forming a notion that was later to play a crucial (and sinister) role. For the present purposes, we may consider it enough to define the *Volk* as an organic communion of people, tradition and nature. In the German tradition, which was extolled by the *Volk* ideologists, the craftsman and the peasant were intimately bound to nature; it was however not nature in general, but nature as ‘native soil’ and ‘landscape’”, that is nature transformed by the local community, i.e. the *Gemeinde*. The *Gemeinde*’s interaction with nature was an essential part of its life through time, that is its tradition. It was, to be sure, an economic community too, but above all it embodied aesthetic, moral and spiritual values, which took on specific forms in different conditions. The members of the community delighted in nature because they were imbued with a sense of belonging to, and the pride of being part of, a natural *and* social whole. Both the community and its landscape were pervaded by the same vital energy, a spiritual force that could not be understood in mechanical and utilitarian terms. Nature was enjoyed and used by the community in a respectful and creative way. The problem of putting limits to its exploitation—a problem raised dramatically by the new urban and industrial centres—simply did not exist. No wonder *Volk* ideology was intrinsically anti-urban and anti-industrial. In big cities economic relationships dominated over, and tended to replace, spiritual relationships; industry destroyed the material and moral landscape shaped by generations. The big city was anti-nature and anti-soul. The passage from agricultural to industrial society was also disruptive of the race: not only did it worsen the quality of air and food, and favoured bad moral behaviours and habits, it also entailed a loss of the sense of national identity. Cosmopolitanism was non-natural and immoral: real values were rooted in “blood and soil”.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The typical representative of cosmopolitanism was the Jew. Being a *déraciné*, the Jew was the opposite of the German peasant and craftsman. Scattered all over the world, the Jewish nation was kept together by an artificial consensus that was quite different from the organic bond of the *Gemeinde*. In many ways, the Jews were the embodiment of all that went against natural and spiritual values. No wonder that Hitler referred to them as

Needless to say, terms like ‘blood’ and ‘soil’ were used to describe historical, spiritual and moral bonds because they were deprived of any specifically biological meaning. They were de-materialized, shrouded in a mythical fog and transformed into shibboleths.<sup>56</sup> The same happened with ‘destiny’ and ‘soul’. As Fritz Stern (1960) and George Mosse (1964) have documented, in the writings of Julius Langbehn, Lagarde, Guido von List, Alfred Schöler and self-styled “neo-Romantics” such as Eugen Diederichs, *völkisch* ideology often shaded into sheer mysticism, even occultism. Seeing ‘through one’s soul’ was said to be superior to knowing through science. Science was rejected as superficial, in that it did not put man in contact with the stream of non-material cosmic forces that were the essence of nature. Only intuitive insight into the life forces enabled man to recover spiritual health and energy in the midst of corrupt modernity. Hearing the voice of nature and feeling at one with its mystery and eternal flow was easier for those who lived closest to nature: the Aryans as a race, and the peasants as a class. The laboratory and the town were not nature. The *Volk* would never degenerate if it kept true to its blood and soil. People should either return to land or re-create an environment where a natural way of life, according to sound traditions, would alleviate social tensions and reinvigorate the race both physically and morally.<sup>57</sup>

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“the typical people that needs no vital space” (the Germans being, on the contrary, the people that needed an expanding *Lebensraum*), and an anti-nature force. On the relations of *Volk* ideologies and German political thinking see Merker 2001.

<sup>56</sup> Mythological racism must not be conflated with biological racism, although the two often merged into one another, and in the same person. By pretending to be ‘scientific’, that is based on purportedly biological ‘data’ and concepts, the first took side within what was thought to be modern science (whatever its social implications or consequences), something irrationalist thinkers and enemies of science could not accept, nor took pain to understand. Most German doctors and biologists did eventually collaborate actively with the Nazi regime, but it is misleading to subsume Nazi racism under the category of social Darwinism, as it is commonly done. Mythologists and *völkisch* ideologists were *against* science as such, especially if it seemed imbued with the English utilitarian and mechanistic spirit. The specifically Darwinian explanation of evolution did not fare well in Germany between the two wars: see La Vergata 1996.

<sup>57</sup> Movements flourished which encouraged life according to nature, that is “blood and soil”. Plans were also devised for establishing utopian Germanic settlements in virgin environments (in Germany and abroad): naturalist communities, garden-cities, associations which practised the cult of the body (gymnastics in the open air and excursions would bring out real man out of the artificial creature of modern materialist civilization), country boarding schools where character could be formed not through bookish education but by full immersion into the regenerating forces of agricultural and rural life. As the founder of the country boarding schools (*Landerziehungsheime*) movement, Hermann Lietz, said in 1934, “an organic education was that which was in tune with nature”. Theodor Fritsch, author of *Stadt der Zukunft* (1896), proposed the

Through their inner eye, individuals would also see themselves as living elements of an intergenerational community, that is of a spiritual whole requiring them to fulfil their duty towards the tradition that gave him his very life. Patriotism took on an inevitably racist tone (not to mention that there were more chances of dangerous miscegenation with non-German elements in hectic, effete and corrupted big towns). This was racism dressed in idealist clothing. The obsessive appeal to ideal values was a key feature of German anti-modernism.<sup>58</sup> And idealism,<sup>59</sup> for which the Germans – the people of *Innerlichkeit* – thought they had a special bent, was the distinctive trait of their *Kultur*, as opposed to foreign *Zivilisation*.

### 11. *Kultur* vs *Zivilisation*

*Kultur* consisted of spiritual values embodied in the living organism of tradition and lying beyond the reach of rational understanding. That was why ‘life’, ‘blood’, ‘soul’, ‘race’, ‘will’, ‘duty’ were not concepts that could be explained rationally, but active forces operating through nature and time. In his *Gedanken im Krieg* (1914), Thomas Mann wrote that *Kultur*, is the result of “the taming and transfiguration of a deep, dark, warm world”, the sublimation of the “demonic” which manifests itself in the “fundamental forces of life” such as art and war. By *Zivilisation* Mann meant “reason, softness, respectability, scepticism, decomposition — *Geist* (Spirit, here opposed to *Seele*, ‘soul’)”. *Geist* meant “civil, bourgeois: it is the sworn enemy of instinct, of passions, it is anti-demonic, anti-heroic”...<sup>60</sup> A host of other authors added to the blacklist terms like utilitarianism, hedonism, materialism, optimism, the superficial belief in progress, intellectualism, the quantitative spirit pervading science, individualism, democracy,

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creation of garden-cities, where life could be closer to nature, as remedies to urbanism and industrialisation. Willibald Hentschel promoted the countryside *Mittgart* settlement, where the race would be brought back to its roots in the landscape of the fatherland, preserved from the deleterious influence of modernity, and liberated from the danger of mixing with inferior elements; the latter were to be left in, or sent back to, the towns, where the harmful environment would dispose of them. While purification was to be achieved through country life, the town was a place of punishment for the misfit.

<sup>58</sup> It was also a key feature of Nazi literature: suffice it to skim through Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.

<sup>59</sup> Stern (1960) coined the term *Vurgäridealismus* to describe the abuse of the word in writings that claimed to be politically neutral but in fact valued obedience and authority above anything else.

<sup>60</sup> Mann 1986, *passim*. Mann expanded on this at unbelievable length in his infamous, and wearisome, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1918).



industrialism, commercialism, mass consumerism, urbanism, pacifism, antipatriotism, antimilitarism, parliamentarism, political tinkering (as opposed to grand statesmanship), moral indifference, the bourgeois desire for security, and the predominance of the prosaic. In a word, these authors added everything that originated in the West (i.e. France and Britain, and later the USA), was alien to the German spirit and could only be imposed on Germans ‘mechanically’, for it could never be assimilated ‘organically’.

Inevitably, the contrast between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* reached its acme with the outbreak of the Great War. German intellectuals poured down an immense quantity of books, articles, pamphlets and appeals defending the right of their country to fight in defense of its *Kultur* against what they unanimously described as an aggression on it. Mann stated with pride that German militarism went hand in hand with German idealism. References to ‘organic community’ and attacks on the ‘mechanical worldview’ abounded in wartime publications. Replacing France as the arch-enemy and the representative of *Zivilisation*, Britain was pointed out as the main responsible for the conflict, and was charged with embodying everything that was alien and opposed to German ideals and values.<sup>61</sup> The war was generally presented as an ‘either you or me’ fight to death between two incommensurable *Weltanschauungen*. Britain had been rotted away by parliamentarism and had become a commercial nation ruled by a culture-hating plutocracy. Its politics was aggressive, hypocritical and crassly cunning. The “renegade” Houston Stewart Chamberlain wrote that the way of life of the Briton, was typical of a “nation of sheep”, all conforming to the fad of the moment, and showing in all its aspects “the same pattern everywhere”, as was to be expected in a country degenerated into a mechanical and materialist civilisation.<sup>62</sup> Britons were all “men of commerce” (*Geschäftsmänner*) in spirit, when not in deeds.<sup>63</sup> They still relied on the old Anglo-Saxon ideal of the strong “individual personality” (*Einzelmann*), thus representing a type of humanity unable to adapt to the modern development of the human *Geist*; the Germans, conversely, represented a higher form of culture, based on the “organised community, which [...] combines both the freedom of its individual parts and the unity of the whole” in every aspect of life, in the army as well as in industry. That was why the Germans were “able to achieve a humane restructuring of the world (*eine liebevolle Weltgestaltung*) by way of the organised community and

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<sup>61</sup> The word “Anglophobia” has been used by Stibbe (2001) to describe the attitude of almost all German intellectuals.

<sup>62</sup> Chamberlain, *Ravings...*, 1916, pp. 53, 113-115.

<sup>63</sup> The historian Hans Delbrück in 1914, quoted by Stibbe 2001, p. 60.

in line with the historical development of the eternal ideal”.<sup>64</sup> According to the historian Friedrich Meinecke, the Germans “had a mission from God to organise the divine essence of man in a separate, unique, irreplaceable form. [...] Through its achievements for the spirit of mankind a nation justifies all its selfish aspirations and thereby its power struggles and wars”. The unique spiritual character of the Germans consisted of a combination of *Innerlichkeit*, individual freedom and willingness to sacrifice one’s own interests to the benefit of the whole. Western countries, by contrast, were characterised by a “uniform, mechanical” type of humanity, degenerate individualism and unbridled selfishness.<sup>65</sup>

The philosopher Max Scheler joined the fray with his massive *Genius des Krieges und der deutsche Krieg* (1915). He saw evidence of “cant”, by which he meant a hypocritical language of self-interest, in all that was British. The British said “thinking” but what they really meant was “calculating” (*rechnen*). They confused civilization and culture with mere “comfort”. They could not understand the true function of war in the life of the State. Scheler also attacked Darwinism as an expression of the British materialist and mechanistic mentality and competitive ethos, which prevented even as honest and good-natured scientist as Darwin from going beyond a merely superficial understanding of life and evolution. Opposition to Darwinism in the name of some form of vitalism or idealism or teleology was not quite rare among German biologists and philosophers at the time, and was to become stronger later on.<sup>66</sup>

The antithesis between ‘mechanical’ Britain and ‘organic’ Germany was perhaps nowhere more radical than in the sociologist Werner Sombart’s infamous *Händler und Helden* (1915). In an article that appeared in the *Berliner Tageblatt* on November, 2<sup>nd</sup> 1914, Sombart candidly but proudly avowed that “the spontaneous and elementary hatred against England is anchored in the deepest core of our being, there where ‘rational considerations’ no longer exist, where the ‘irrational’, the instinctive, has sole jurisdiction. We hate in the English a principle which is alien to our innermost and highest being”.<sup>67</sup> Not realizing that such a statement preempted any attempts at motivating in writing his, and his fellow countrymen’s, struggle with Britain, Sombart launched out into a repetitious, obsessive contrast between two worldviews, indeed between two spiritual categories. Long quotations would spare us any comment, but to

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<sup>64</sup> The economist and Reichstag deputy Gerhard von Schulze-Gaevernitz, quoted by Stibbe 2001, pp. 62-63.

<sup>65</sup> Meinecke 1915, p. 51.

<sup>66</sup> See Harrington 1996.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted by Stibbe 2001, p. 12.

prevent the reader from getting bored I have confined them to an Appendix. Here it will suffice to say that Sombart made it clear that ‘organic’ had by then virtually severed any links with biology, and had come to mean ‘spiritually harmonious’ or ‘imbued with idealism’. Needless to say, Sombart characterised the “British worldwide Empire” as a “commercial firm” devoid of, and inimical to, any moral value.

Finally, it was during the war that Oswald Spengler’s enormously successful *Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918-1922) cultures were described as incommensurable and mutually exclusive wholes, as organisms mysteriously born of nature’s unfathomable womb and returning to it as mysteriously after growing, reaching maturity, flourishing, decaying and dying. As it became clearer after the war, Spengler opposed both liberalism and Marxist socialism, which he charged with the usual list of faults, including the obvious one: being “mechanical”. His hopes for an organic society lay in “Prussian socialism”, by which he meant a confused mixture of aristocracy, hierarchy, medieval chivalry, German *Kultur*, *Innerlichkeit*, order and authoritarianism (he admired Mussolini more than Hitler).<sup>68</sup>

The opposition to modernity was a *Leitmotiv* in what has come to be known as the “conservative revolution” of the Weimar years. Its exponents described themselves as basically “against”: against liberalism, parliamentarism, capitalism (but also communism), individualism (but also collectivism). They enjoyed antitheses, which are a boon for historians. Below is a list of some of those contained in the writings of one of the most representative authors of the movement, Moeller van den Bruck, especially in his *Das dritte Reich* (1923). The good things are, needless to say, on the right:

industrial society	[authority of the] <i>totaler Staat</i>
particularism	the Whole
individual	community
progress	growth
modernity	timeless values
	rationalism
	inner bond of a living and indestructible order

“Growth”, it will be noted, is more ‘organic’ than progress.

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<sup>68</sup> O. Spengler, *Preußentum und Sozialismus*, Munich, 1920. Sternhell (2006; It. transl., pp. 511-512) pointed out interesting similarities between Spengler’s view of cultures and that of the panslavic Russian philosopher and social writer N.J. Danilevski (1822-1885).

And here is a second list, based on ‘Deutschland und die konservative Revolution’ (1932),<sup>69</sup> written by Edgar Jung, who was a member of Moeller’s circle and Reichkanzler von Papen’s counsellor and ghost writer:

temporality	eternity
party politics	ideals of Western man
equality	inner worth
social and political principles ( <i>Gesinnung</i> )	organic growth of the leader ( <i>Führer</i> )
bureaucratic obligation	personal responsibility
mass happiness	<i>Volk</i> identity ( <i>Volkspersönlichkeit</i> )
“logocentric” frame of mind ( <i>Einstellung</i> )	biocentric frame of mind

As Peter Gay (1992, p. 80) shrewdly remarked, the Nazi were to show what a keen sense they had of “the kind of wholeness most Germans were looking for” by preferring to call themselves not a party but a “movement” (*Bewegung*): “It sounded more organic”, he commented.

## 12. *Machines get a soul*

Conservative revolutionists did not like science and technology more than *völkisch* ideologists did. Being the most visible aspect of modernity, technology remained under concentric fire from the neo-Romantics, expressionists (like Toller and Kaiser), *Lebensphilosophen* (like Klages and Scheler), irrationalist opponents of positivism and scientism, and left-wing critics of reification (including members of the Frankfurt school). The debate on technology reached its apex in the *Streit um die Technik* in the 1920s. On the one hand, (neo)positivists and theorists of industrial society believed that

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<sup>69</sup> Jung (1932, p. 380) defined the conservative revolution as “the putting again in the foreground (*Wiederinachtsetzung*) of all those elementary laws and values without which man loses his bond with Nature and God, and no real order can be built”. In *Die Herrschaft der Minderwertigen. Ihr Zerfall und ihre Ablösung* (1927) Jung, who was later a collaborator of Goebbels’, championed a corporate elite State modelled after the Medieval *Reich* (Leipzig, 1927). Note the use of the word ‘*minderwertige*’ (the inferior), of sinister fame. On Jung see Jones 1988. In his essay on Freud (1929), Thomas Mann, who did sympathise with the conservative revolution until the assassination of Walter Rathenau in 1922, defined it retrospectively (and from the vantage point of the repentant) as “an attempt to politicise the irrational leanings of the recent thinking on life (*Lebensforschung*), to translate it into a crude reaction in a revolutionary light.”

technology was a positive force in the rationalization of society because it helped create a neutral ground in which conflict and struggle would be attenuated. On the other hand, there were those who equated technological advance with the domination of the spiritless over the spiritual, or of means over ends.<sup>70</sup> Technology was also seen as a symbol, or a cause, of capitalism, Fordism, mass production and consumption, *Amerikanismus*. It conquered the world by dehumanizing it. It was the enemy of life. In the words of the self-styled “national bolshevik” journalist Ernst Niekisch, technology was “men-eating”. The words he used to describe the “anti-life, demonic character” of technology are self-explanatory: “Technology is the rape of nature. It brushes nature aside [...] When technology triumphs, nature is violated and desolated. Technology murders life by striking down, step by step, the limits established by nature. It devours men and all that is human.”<sup>71</sup>

### 13. Conclusion

The Great War put paid to many of the aberrations sponsored by the intellectuals who rushed enthusiastically to it through the most decisive of arguments, i.e. mass death. It did not put an end to the German mistrust towards *Zivilisation*. Far from this, it fuelled resentment and further strengthened the myth of German uniqueness. The war had been lost, and Spengler voiced a widespread complaint when he said that the persisting hostility of ‘Romantics’ to modern technology had prevented the country from fully deploying its military potential. This was one of many variations on the “stab in the back” theme. Now the spirit of *revanche* obliged *Kultur* to come to terms with technology, if Germany was to claim the leading position it was entitled to in the world. Re-armament, after all, could not be left to

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<sup>70</sup> For instance, as early as 1900 the philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel had expressed his fear that technical development “might turn the apparatus into a self-sufficing being”; “a slave revolt of the means against the ends” would ensue, “the slave (the means) becoming the master of its master (man)” (Simmel 1900, pp. 521-522). Herman Hesse would translate this fear into a vivid vision of a struggle between men and machines in his *The Steppenwolf* (1927). We are all familiar with many later artistic representations of analogous scenes, including the famous revolt of the computer in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: a Space Odyssey* (1968), inspired by Arthur C. Clarke’s *The Sentinel* (1948). Clarke collaborated to the script, and later wrote the novel *2001* to clear the doubts left by the film.

<sup>71</sup> ‘Menschefresser Technik’, *Widerstand*, 6, 1931, p. 110; quoted in Herf 1987, p. 39.

industrialists and politicians only. Patriotic intellectuals had to roll up their sleeves and adjust themselves to a new task. Fortunately, many of them have always shown a remarkable ability to change their minds according to the circumstances. And many of them answered the *Volk's* summons. During the extraordinary and tragic years of the Weimar Republic, they set themselves to work in order to redeem technology by conferring the dignity of *Kultur* upon it. As a result, in the 1920s and 1930s many German intellectuals were able to reconcile their hostility to industrial society with a fascination for technological achievements. In what Jeffrey Herf aptly called “reactionary modernism”, technology was made compatible with the German revolt against Western capitalism, liberalism and scientific positivism. In other words, technology could be legitimised without the German soul succumbing to Enlightenment rationality; it could be rescued from *Zivilisation* and made a part of *Kultur*. The new view of technology was couched in the very language of instinct, blood, organism, nation, soil, will, duty, life (and ‘idealism’, for that matter) that had been used by *Volk* ideologists to oppose it.<sup>72</sup> Among those who endeavoured to reconcile technology with *Kultur* were some of the authors that had presented the war as one against *Zivilisation*. The most comprehensive attempt was made by Ernst Jünger, and it would deserve a discussion of its own. Spengler, too, played his part, especially in his famous Munich paper *Der Mensch und die Technik* (published in 1931). There he argued that technology was a product of the very “Faustian” spirit which manifested itself in the highest achievements of *Kultur*.<sup>73</sup> The jurist Carl Schmitt went even so far as to poke fun at the Romantic opposition of organic and mechanical.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Herf 1987 examines not only intellectuals such as Spengler, Sombart, Niekisch, Jünger, Schmitt, but also the writings of engineers and other ‘mechanics’. See also Losurdo 1991, pp. 112-118.

<sup>73</sup> La Vergata 2002. It was a somewhat different Spengler from the one who, in a letter dated 25<sup>th</sup> October 1914 (quoted in Stibbe 2001, p. 71), had expressed his fears that “in the Germany which made its world position secure through technical skill, money and an eye for facts, a completely soulless Americanism will rule, and will dissolve art, the nobility, the Church, and world outlook in a materialism such as only once has been seen – in Rome at the time of the First Empire.” It should not be forgotten that by *Zivilisation* Spengler meant, in the *Untergang* and afterwards, not something alien and opposed to *Kultur*, but the last and declining phase of *Kultur*: *Zivilisation* was, to be sure, increasingly mechanical and dead-oriented for Spengler, too, but it was so because it was the dying echo of a former flourishing life.

<sup>74</sup> Schmitt, *Politische Romantik* (1919), quoted by Losurdo 1991, p. 113. Like Spengler, Schmitt had spoken differently at the beginning of the war: in 1914, he had declared it was time to reckon with the “spirit of the time”, that is “the age of the machine and organization, the mechanistic age”, the age “of the most generalized calculability (*der*

The alliance between bombers and philosophers, between Krupp and *Kultur*, eventually led Germany to an even greater disaster. This is another story, and historians are still debating whether that of Germany was a *Sonderweg* doomed from the beginning or something the Germans shared, although in uniquely tragic proportions, with the Western world that so many of them despised. Whatever the case, the lesson taught by reactionary modernism should be kept before us whenever we discuss technology. For it teaches that the same intellectual tools and strategies can be used now to accuse, now to excuse technology. To make things more complicated, most of us are today in a situation not unlike that of ‘neo-Romantic’ German intellectuals. We enjoy, we actually strive for, technological commodities and gadgets, while at the same time nourishing, in some hidden part of our souls, a dislike for the way of thinking technology implies. We pay lip-service to appeals to protect nature from industrial greed, and we go back to playing with our new-model mobile cell phone. We, humanists, feel superior to mere ‘technicians’, but we resort to them to take care of our air-conditioning devices. We are swinging, as it were, between two soft forms of opposed fundamentalisms. This state of mind may be deemed ‘romantic’, hypocritical or schizophrenic, but it deserves to be analyzed in depth. History, as I said at the beginning, has more than a word to say with respect to this task.

According to Zeev Sternhell, “organicism, a supreme form of subordination of the individual to collectivity, is one of the major ‘mother-ideas’ in the thought of anti-Enlightenment thinkers”.<sup>75</sup> It can reasonably be added that not only right-wing thinking, but communist totalitarianism, too, is liable to this charge. Now, the Soviet Union was far from an anti-technological country; it spoiled the environment and destroyed nature as much as rugged capitalism did. There seems to be no necessary connection between subordination of the individual to collectivity and the rejection of technology. Likewise, not all forms of campaigning for the protection of nature from technology are ‘conservative’ and ‘reactionary’ *per se*, although they imply some form of limitation ‘from above’ of the individuals’ freedom to carry their happiness their way. In such matters, virtue hardly boils down to having a look at the bad and then do the opposite. It is possible to be in the right *and* in a bad company. Nobody, I hope, would rush for a cigarette on his/her learning that Hitler declared war on smoking, nor would one hold pollution sacred because the Nazis launched a programme of nature protection. However, a sober attitude towards ‘nature *vs.* technology’ issues requires acknowledging that traces of organicism still live on in, or rather

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*allgemeinste Berechenbarkeit*) (*Der Wert des Staates und die Bedeutung des Einzelnen*, quoted *ibid.*, p. 212).

<sup>75</sup> Sternhell 2006; I am quoting from p. 299 of the Italian translation (2007).

behind, some strands of present-day environmentalism, which is so large and supra-national a movement that it can host people of the most diverse political leanings. Whenever such issues are discussed, it would be good practice to ask if the arguments that are being used—regardless of whether for or against—carry with them unconscious assumptions and emotional implications characteristic of the context in which they originated; in other words, we should ask if these arguments, as it were, bear the indelible stamp of the womb which generated them. And here is where history, or, better, historical sense and sensitivity come in. The only firm conclusion I have come to is that we should give up discussing vital issues in universal terms, or, as 17<sup>th</sup>-century natural theologians used to say, “from a higher point of view”.

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## *Appendix*

Selected passages from Werner Sombart, *Händler und Helden. Patriotische Besinnungen*, München, Duncker & Humblot, 1915. Translation is mine.

There is nothing in history that can be compared to the English State, except, perhaps, the ancient merchant States of the Phoenicians and Carthaginians. However, a “worldwide empire” born of a purely commercial spirit has never been seen before. The uniqueness of the English State lies in that it embodies none of the right ideas about the State that have been worked out so far, namely that it is an organically articulated human community, unitary from the point of view of both cultural and civil life, to which colonies, as far as I see it, belong in full right, as its external realizations.

Everything we have learned so far from great States has been generated organically from vital impulses. But the universal English empire has grown mechanically, piece by piece, like an invested capital: its individual components are ‘accumulated’ and joined to the mother country by a very tenuous link. [...] In what sense does India, a country of 300 million inhabitants, ‘belong’ to Great Britain? This ‘belonging’ has a meaning only if the whole worldwide English empire is understood in a commercial sense, that is if it is conceived not as a State but as a vast mercantile firm, with the mother country as its headquarters, where the money and the administration are kept, and the colonies as its local agencies.

That England, as a country, was formed in a completely inorganic way is shown by a look at statistics. A State whose citizens are not, for the most part, employed in agriculture is manifestly, as it were, a malformation. Now, in England those active in agriculture (and, interestingly, in fishing) have decreased to a mere 8% (!), i.e. one twelfth of the population. Against this background, one fourth of the population is represented by traders and people employed in communications, and nearly one half (45%) by those working in industry. Such a State is a caricature, it is no longer a living unit, but a commercial business. (pp. 35-37)

[...]

The mercantile spirit is essentially destructive: it is a purely mechanical idea of all that pertains to the State. It purports to maintain the balance of ‘forces’. But only dead things can be ‘weighed’, not living beings, which is what States really are. Adam Müller poured his contempt on the ‘miserable

image of the balancing scales’, as if ‘the right of the peoples were nothing but the result of a political arithmetic’. (pp. 39-40)

[...]

The statement that ‘all power comes from God’ is not the historical reason behind the bourgeois constitution, but an idea [in Kant’s sense], a practical principle of reason, and something more. Its spirit has nothing to do with the mechanistic, materialistic and individualistic theories of the State of Western Europe.

[...]

The essence of the German idea of the State must be defined as objective and organic, as it is clearly rooted in the fundamental view that the State is not based on, or constituted by, individuals, it is not an assemblage of individuals, and it does not have the purpose of promoting the particular interests of the individuals.

If anything, the State is the community of the people (*Volksgemeinschaft*) forming a unity. It is the conscious organisation of a supra-individual entity, to which the individuals belong as its parts. Having come to recognise the supra-individual existence and the power of the community of the people, the heroic worldview must inevitably attain to this idea of the State. For only in the unity of the State could the living whole made up of people come to an awareness of itself and make its own essence concrete.

Opponents of this German idea of the State often attempt to diminish its value by branding it ‘reactionary’ and by contrasting it to the ‘progressive’ theory of the State, which is peculiar to the English shopkeeper’s spirit. Let me recall once again the words used by [the socialist] Ferdinand Lassalle to explain his view of the essence of the State, which was based on the theory of his teacher Fichte: “The State is the unity of individuals in an ethical whole, a unity that increases by millions of times the forces of all individuals included in it [...]. The purpose of the State is, therefore, to bring the essence of man to its full unfolding; in other words, to shape the destiny of man—that is, the civilization of which mankind is capable—to real existence. The final goal is the education of mankind, and its development towards freedom. This is the proper ethical nature of the State, its true and supreme duty”.

‘Development towards freedom’: this is what Fichte meant when he spoke of the individual’s freedom to give himself a form by which to reach his ethical perfection, a perfection he, as an ideal being, possesses *a priori*. It means to become, by approximating to the idea, what one really is in the ideal.

“Sirs, however great are the differences that can separate us [socialists] from you—so Lassalle addresses his judges when concluding his famous speech before the King’s Supreme Court—we [socialists] both oppose, side by

side, the disintegration of all that is moral! I defend, like you, the ancient Vesta's fire burning in every civilizations, the State, against modern barbarians (the Manchestertum)!".

The view according to which individuals have first of all duties towards the whole, and that rights can be granted to them only to the extent that they perform their duties, is inseparable from this idea of the State. This idea rejects the abstract, the merely quantitative levelling of individuals, and it sets itself the ideal of enabling each of them, according to their abilities and performances, to reach the full development of their essence in a way that is profitable for the success of the whole.

This view is called 'organic' not because—as most people think— it compares the State to an organism in a biological sense. (This comparison should be abandoned, or used with great caution. It easily leads to mistakes, as whenever it is used in a theory of the State, it is associated with the objective and organic, and specifically German, idea of the State, which cannot be admitted. So was Hobbes' theory of the State born of the English, not the German, spirit). This view is defined 'organic', and rightly so, because it is opposed to the English mechanistic concept, and because the individual's relation to the whole is seen as organic in the sense that individuals must integrate 'organically', that is spiritually, into the spiritual whole.

If you like, we have here, too, an analogy with the biological organism, but in an altogether different sense. Naturally, also the State is a living being, but a meta-biological, a spiritual living being, in which the individuals participate by their spiritual life. (pp. 73-78)

[...]

Now, nature is incessantly urging every State to affirm itself as a living being, to confront and measure against other States. It is proper to any living being to extend its activity: in every State there lives 'an inner drive the present generation is unaware of, but which derives from that of past generations, to its vital growth', as Adam Müller, once again, put it most aptly.

There is a 'vital growth' in the organic State only: no expansive tendency dominates over it that is non-vital, founded on merely commercial reasons—as it was the case with the mechanically assembled English Empire. All forces, all organs, all limbs of the State must keep together in a harmonious relation: this view represents a constitutive element of what we have learned here to recognise as an objective, organic, in a word German, idea of the State.

The idea of the autonomous organic life of every State has replaced the shopkeeper's view of a mutual, non-vital balance between individual States.

It is an idea that contains all guiding principles for a healthy State politics.  
[...]

The struggle between States, that is the war between peoples, is a phenomenon that necessarily accompanies the life of a State. For it is an aspect of life itself. The justification of war lies, therefore, in the natural condition of the whole living world, to which the States necessary belong: ‘quella guerra è giusta, che è necessaria’<sup>76</sup>, said the man who should teach history to a world of merchants. The opposition between merchants and heroes amounts to the opposition between shopkeepers and warriors, between whom we are called upon to choose. (pp. 79-81)

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<sup>76</sup> Original text in Italian: “That war is just which is necessary”.