MOST OF THE WORLD
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To A. L. WENNER-GREN

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MOST OF THE WORLD
It is well-nigh impossible for the people of any period to tell what contemporary events are going to make an enduring mark on history, and when they guess, they usually guess wrong. If Americans were asked what had been the most important event of the twentieth century, most of them would certainly answer that it was the release of atomic energy. This is natural enough for the members of a society like our own, with its devotion to mechanical improvements and laboratory sciences. The atom bomb and the peacetime applications which we dimly perceive behind it mark the culmination of our drive for control over the forces of nature. The prospect of flying the Atlantic on a pound of fuel is the veritable apotheosis of the Machine Age.

Spectacular as these developments are, it seems highly improbable that they mark any turning point in history. Barring the universal catastrophe of an atomic war, there is no reason to believe that the new atomic discoveries will bring about any changes in our patterns of living which would not have been brought about by the continuing development of our pre-atomic technology. A full-scale atomic war would be less a turning point in history than its rounding off, a neat conclusion to the far from creditable record of our species; but the chances of such a debacle will diminish as our understanding of its full consequences increases. No nation was ever deterred from using a weapon because it was too terrible or too inhuman, but a fair number of weapons have been laid aside because they were too dangerous. It will scarcely pay a nation to wipe out an antagonist at the cost of spending the next few thousand years in an atmosphere supercharged with fission products.

Turning from such doubtful musings, it seems likely that the historians of a few millennia hence will be less impressed than we are with our machines and laboratories. By that time mankind will
have grown used to the control of nature which we now find so novel and thrilling and will be able to see the various steps in the development of this control in their proper perspective. One may hazard a guess that the nineteenth century will be the one called "The Century of Technological Invention." The twentieth will be known not as "The Century of Atomic Energy" but as either "The Century of Social and Political Invention" or "The Beginning of the Dark Ages." To be sure "Dark Ages" already has a particular meaning for Europeans, but it is improbable that the world-minded historians of the future will apply this term to a slight regression in the stream of European culture which was more than counterbalanced by the artistic accomplishment of the Tang dynasty and the vivid intellectual life of the Caliphate. If the twentieth is not the century of successful social and political invention, the oncoming Dark Age will be lit by no such beacons.

Whether we like it or not, one world is today a functional reality, and the unification has gone far enough so that the peoples of the world must stand or fall together. Like so many other significant developments of our time, this world unification has emerged without plan or intention. It has been an accidental by-product of the technological and commercial developments on which the attention of the West has been focused. These developments brought needs for new materials and, under capitalism, for new markets. They also made possible the conquest and domination of territories which would supply these needs. More recently, such developments as the airplane and radio have played their part in drawing tighter the web which commerce and industry had woven. The new ideologies which disturb us and the current attempts to develop some sort of world political organization are simply recognitions of the fait accompli, belated attempts to bring political and social forms into some sort of adjustment with current reality.

That human life has changed more in the last hundred and fifty years than in the previous five thousand is so obvious that it scarcely needs to be said, yet it is hard for most of us to realize how revolutionary the changes have been. Only a century and a half ago, most of the world's inhabitants lived very much as their ancestors had lived since the close of the Stone Age. In fact in many parts of the world this Age had not closed. Each little local group could and
did produce its own necessities and traded its scanty surplus only for luxury objects or novelties. Here and there a group found itself dependent on its neighbors for some necessity such as iron or salt, but the quantities needed were small.

This narrow economic horizon was matched by an even narrower intellectual one. The average man’s world ended very near the limits of his village’s fields. The curious habits and ideas of people outside that world came to him as amusing bits of folklore, sources of self-congratulation. They had no bearing on his everyday life. Meeting a stranger was not only an event, but one fraught with peril, since, except for pilgrims and peddlers, honest people stayed at home. Religion centered in the local deity or the ancestral tomb, justice in the village elders gathered at the threshing floor in the cool of the evening, and government, where it existed, was represented by the tax collector, a pest regarded on a par with locusts or drought.

Today, thanks to the development of modern means of transport and communication, this age-long mold of human life has been broken. The docile villagers of Shangri La can tune in on Radio Moscow. Even the New Guinea pigmy turns from the cultivation of his vertical yam patch to wave a ragged O.D. jacket at passing planes, wondering why this magic gesture no longer brings chocolate from heaven. Even when the members of different societies cannot see or hear each other, they can still feel each other plucking at the strands which bind the modern world together. A new tariff in the United States deprives South Sea Islanders of badly needed matches and fishhooks, and the lagging production of English cotton mills causes political unrest in Nigeria. Most of the world has become so interdependent that a collapse of the present network of trade and communication would be a calamity on a par with the Black Death.

It is highly ironic that at the very time when the technical possibilities for communication seem to be rising to a crescendo, the lagging development of our social and political forms should threaten the whole structure. The liberation of India marks the end of a period of political unification unique in world history. From the end of the eighteenth century up until World War I, most of the planet was under unified control. After the early period of colonial
wars, Europe settled down to a long peace based on the balance of power. In spite of quarrels within the continent, the European nations in their dealings with the rest of the world functioned practically as a confederacy. Such feeble members of the European family as Portugal and Holland were allowed to keep the colonial empires won by their vigorous ancestors and even Belgium was given the Congo. The few parts of the world which had not been brought under European flags during the earlier period of triumphant piracy were divided into spheres of influence which had all the advantages of colonial possessions without the expenses of colonial administration. Strikingly similar systems of government and exploitation were imposed wherever the Europeans came, and in spite of the varying flags and languages the *pax Europa* was as unified as the *pax Romana* had been.

Within the shadow of this peace there sprouted the beginnings of a real world society, an organic growth as accidental as the conditions which made it possible. Never before in the world’s history had individuals enjoyed an equal freedom of either spacial or social movement. I still remember vividly the first time that I obtained a passport, in 1912. The passport office was in a slightly remodeled brownstone dwelling and there was only one bored clerk in attendance. When I stated my business he looked puzzled and asked: “Where are you going? Turkey?” The document, when I received it, looked like a high school diploma and was clearly designed to impress illiterate minor officials. Prior to World War I it was possible to travel almost anywhere on earth with no better credentials than a checkbook. The priests of the great deity Commerce wandered with the freedom of the religious mendicants of earlier times, and, like these mendicants, they were bound together by a sort of informal freemasonry. International settlements were scattered from Kabul to Cuzco, little groups of expatriates who always damned the locality and talked sentimentally of home, but who were never happy when they went home. Membership in such groups depended only on finances and foreignness. The local native was pretty sure to be excluded from the local club, but anyone above a certain degree of affluence and sophistication was welcome if he came from outside.

The freemasonry of commerce was as nothing compared to that
of science. No budding research worker felt that his training was complete unless he had studied in at least one country beside his own, and in later years he treasured friendships with fellow workers of all nationalities. In general, the scientist was more consciously international in his outlook than the businessman and was inclined to deprecate patriotism. He saw science as a sort of universal religion which would bring the salvation of all mankind and was eager to pool his findings with those of other scientists. Actually, ideas were passed about with complete indifference to national lines. The latest discovery of an Indian physicist would be tested in Germany and America only weeks after it was announced.

During this period, it even seemed that the world might be moving toward a common basic culture modeled on that of Europe. The prestige of the European was enormous and the advantages to be derived from taking over his science and technology were quite obvious. While those members of non-European groups who derived their advantage from their position in old-style native society might fight Europeanization, most native peoples were ready to copy white ways uncritically and as completely as they could. Their attitudes toward their European rulers were ambivalent; hatred mixed with admiration and resentment of current social discrimination mitigated by the expectation that when they learned to behave like whites they would be treated like whites. In many parts of the European colonial empire, the French territories for example, the promise of the last was direct and explicit. The discovery by the native elite that they were not treated like Europeans even when formally admitted to citizenship has probably caused more bitterness than all the commercial exploitation to which native groups have been subjected.

It would be wrong to picture this period as a golden age. There was plenty of injustice and exploitation under the pax Europa and this was by no means limited to the colonies. At the very time when the wealth of the world was being siphoned off into Europe, most European labor lived and worked under conditions which any modern American would consider intolerable. Native peoples often existed, as they still do, at a level of deprivation which the same American would consider not so much intolerable as incredible. However, with all its shortcomings, this period represented many
genuine gains over anything that had gone before. The possibility of one world as well as its desirability was widely recognized for the first time and mankind was given a glimpse of what such a unified humanity might accomplish.

The *pax Europa* ended in August, 1914, with the breaking of the united front which Europeans had presented to the colonial peoples for almost a century. Even though no native peoples won their independence during the thirty years that followed, the ferment of revolt spread steadily through the colonial fabric. In retrospect, it seems that the Europeans showed a curious lack of realism in dealing with their subjects. The European hegemony had been built on a combination of military power and technological superiority. Native mercenaries were always relied on heavily in colonial wars, but now they were used against other Europeans, thus giving them a superior training in modern mechanized warfare. This might not have been of too great importance if the science and technology required to implement a modern fighting force had been kept a European monopoly but, with few exceptions, Europeans have provided their subjects with opportunities for modern education and have allowed mechanization in the colonies at the whim of private capital. In effect, they have done their best to place in the hands of the subject peoples the very weapons used to keep them in subjection. One is reminded of the quaint duels of the now extinct Tasmanians in which one man hit another on the head with a club, then handed the club to him and waited for the return blow.

The renewed clash in Europe and the battle with Japan have given the subject peoples their chances, and the last semblance of European hegemony is disappearing as the Asiatic colonies break away one by one and the various "spheres of influence" reject the policies of their former guardians. Although some of the feeble or less-advanced groups may be kept in colonial status for a few generations longer, it is obvious that the colonial system is on the way out. The significance of this for the present European and North American economic systems is obvious. With the last checks on mechanization removed, it will be only a question of time until most of the regions which now provide Europe with markets and sources of raw material will become competitors. What Japan did can be done by most of the other long-civilized oriental groups.
Behind this threat to the present economic system there lies another threat which is at least equally serious. During the period of the European hegemony, the world seemed to be moving toward cultural unity under the influence of European prestige. The possibility of such unity has now retreated into the remote future. The debacle in Europe has thrown the shortcomings of Western civilization into glaring relief, and the rest of the world is becoming more and more selective in its cultural borrowings. While Western technology and science are in demand everywhere, many of the former subjects do not want the rest of Western civilization. There is a widespread resurgence of cultural as well as political nationalism, the revival of certain of the old ways becoming symbolic of the new freedom. The next fifty years will certainly witness a whole series of attempts to synthesize modern science and technology with the Chinese, Indonesian, Indian, and Islamic civilizations. That such syntheses can be successful is shown by the pre-war situation in Japan where modern science and Emperor worship were able to flourish side by side.

To the stresses set up by increasing economic competition there will be added, therefore, those resulting from the clash of cultures. Increasing ease of transportation and communication are quite as likely to intensify these stresses as to diminish them. The frequently repeated statement that if you really know the members of another society you will like them is wishful thinking at its worst. There are many societies whose attitudes and values are so antithetical that the better their members know each other, the less they will like each other. Any Latins who were given an opportunity to get well acquainted with Nazi Germans can give testimony on this point. Moreover, frequent contacts between members of different societies have in themselves potentialities for trouble. It is difficult to insult either individuals or groups at long range, distressingly easy to do so face-to-face. Ego injuries rankle even more than physical ones and a few unfortunate episodes may produce lasting hostility toward all members of a foreign group.

Engrossed as we are in the present struggle with Russia, most Americans tend to ignore the nations which are now winning their freedom from political or economic domination. These nations do not belong on either side of the iron curtain. They have experienced
Western European domination at its worst and as the earlier idealistic aspects of Communism dissolve into too familiar patterns for Russian world conquest, their enthusiasm for the new religion has waned. They view the possibility of an armed clash between the two foci of power with the pleased resignation of a man who anticipates that one of his enemies will kill the other and get hung for it. Capitalism and Communism, Democracy and Totalitarianism are equally foreign to these nations, and any apparent conversion to any of them will be only a transitory episode in the slow unfolding of their own deeply rooted civilizations.

It is hard for Americans, reared in the traditions of European ethnocentrism, to appreciate the importance of these emergent powers. In population and natural resources they represent most of the world and they are moving toward technological equality with the West at a startling rate. The purpose of this book is to give an accurate picture of the conditions which exist in most of the world today in the hope that this may assist in the formation of public opinion and may provide a basis of sound knowledge for future planning. The task which confronts us now is that of trying to reconstitute one world on the basis of collaboration rather than domination. We must devise techniques to conserve the advantages of the former European hegemony as far as possible while rectifying its injustices. Any realist must recognize that the chances of accomplishing this are far from good at present. However, we must find what consolation we can in the knowledge that if we fail there will be others to try again, and again, until world unity is achieved.