

## PROLOGUE

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# Backing into the Millennium

This is a book about the past, and about the future: about the terms in which we make sense of the past, and the ways in which our view of the past affects our posture in dealing with the future. The beliefs that shape our historical foresight represent (as German philosophers put it) our *Erwartungshorizonten*, or "horizons of expectation." Those horizons mark limits to the field of action in which, at the moment, we see it as possible or feasible to change human affairs, and so to decide which of our most cherished practical goals can be realized in fact.

As we enter the 1990s, the third millennium of our calendar is ten years ahead; and at this, of all times, onlookers might expect us to take stock, reassess our historical situation in history, and shape fresh ideas about directions in which to move—not goals we can pursue individually, but reasonable and realistic ambitions for us to embrace as a community. Instead, with eyes lowered, we are backing into a new millennium, with little serious attention to the questions, "Where shall we be, and where will we be in a position to go, from the year 2001 on?" Twenty years ago, the situation was different. In the late 1960s, many writers kept alive the practice of reflecting on and debating the prospect of human society and culture in the next century and the coming millennium. Some of the writers who participated in that debate analyzed the current trends and extrapolated them over future decades, so arriving at long-range social and political forecasts, even though these were subject to qualification. But what strikes us most, looking back, is the failure of these writers to forecast important changes that were to take place after they wrote, but before their target date, not least the revival of fundamentalist religion, at home and abroad.

Social forecasting is of course notoriously chancy. Even in the field of meteorology, detailed predictions are not practicable for more than a few days ahead; and, if social or political forecasting is even harder, that should

come as no surprise. The strength of well-formed "horizons of expectation" is not that they generate accurate forecasts, to serve as a theoretical basis for the practical politics of the future. Bertrand de Jouvenel has, indeed, explained clearly and exactly why our capacity for *prévision sociale* is so limited. The most that we can hope to foresee is the limits within which "available" human futures lie. Available futures are not just those that we can passively forecast, but those that we can actively create: for these de Jouvenel coined a new name—"futuribles". They are futures which do not simply happen *of themselves*, but can be *made to happen*, if we meanwhile adopt wise attitudes and policies.

How are we to recognize and select "wise attitudes and policies"? A well formulated approach to the future—a realistic range of available futuribles, within reasonable horizons of expectation—does not depend on finding ways to quantify and extrapolate current trends: that we may leave to enthusiastic weather forecasters, stock exchange chartists, or econometrists. Rather, the questions are, "What intellectual *posture* should we adopt in confronting the future? What eye can we develop for significant aspects of the years ahead? And what capacity do we have to change our ideas about the available futures?" Those who refuse to think coherently about the future, correspondingly, only expose themselves to worse, leaving the field clear to unrealistic, irrational prophets.

Ideally, social or political thought is always framed by realistic horizons of expectation; but a people's actual horizons will frequently be *unrealistic*. Thus, in Oliver Cromwell's time, many educated Englishmen believed that God would bring the order of things to an end in the 1650s; and they looked in the *Book of Revelations* for allusions to 17th-century England as uncritically as any Texan fundamentalist looks today for signs of an imminent rapture of the saved. The fact that the end of the world did not occur on schedule deeply shocked many of the Commonwealth worthies; but in the meanwhile they discussed policies and plans within delusory horizons of expectation. Some of them even argued that the Jews should be readmitted to England, on the grounds that God could make ready His Apocalypse, and build a New Jerusalem on English soil, only after the conversion of the Jews. When Ronald Reagan dipped into *Revelations* in the 1984 Presidential campaign and included among his expectations a coming Armageddon, therefore, listeners with an ear for history heard in his words some disturbing echoes of the 1650s.

The historical agnosticism and short-term thinking of the 1980s reflect a general sense that, today, the historical horizon is unusually hard to focus on, and is shrouded in fog and darkness. Experience in the last quarter-century has convinced people that the 21st century will resemble the 20th

even less than the 20th century has: the end of an era not just in a calendrical sense, but in a deeper, historical sense. The 19th century has ended, and the hegemony of Europe has ended. For a hundred years, people in Western Europe were content to believe that theirs was the best of times, and that industry and manufacturing was the "modern" way of life. That they had "modern" scientific and technological advantages, and a relative security of "modern" national institutions, and intellectual problems in distribution of resources, were not available to people in other, less fortunate cultures that existed before.

Twenty years ago many writers were predicting that extrapolation for decades ahead—of social tendencies and cultural trends—would be evident another 40 or 50 years—is evident today. The sense of historical discontinuity and sense of historical *discontinuity* are being experienced today. When they show a belief that, in the last 300 years, Europe had succeeded (in John Locke's words) in the underbrush that stands in the way of progress, they only prevent ideological and theoretical problems both the intellectual and the practical from being ready to hand.

Today, the program of Modernity carries anything like the same confidence as the era of Modernity itself. Rather than a tide of Modernity still flows strong into a new and better world, our confidence has looked in the 19th century like a mirage in the sand, and we seem to have run aground. The social and cultural future is uncertain at our location. The very project of Modernity has lost its momentum, and we need to face the future.

To form reasonable and realistic expectations must therefore begin by reconstituting a social, and historical assumptions in which the Modern project was based. A sequence of episodes that has led

even less than the 20th century has resembled the 19th. We are now at the end of an era not just in a calendrical sense—leaving behind a thousand years starting with a “1”, and entering a thousand years that will start with “2”—but in a deeper, historical sense. The political supremacy of Europe has ended, and the hegemony of European ideas is ending too. For two hundred years, people in Western Europe and North America were content to believe that theirs was the modern age: that their way of farming and manufacturing was the “modern” one, along with their medical skills, that they had “modern” scientific and philosophical ideas, and lived in the relative security of “modern” nation states. They tackled all their practical and intellectual problems in distinctive “modern” ways; and, in a dozen fields, their life embodied rational ways of testing our procedures and institutions, not available to people in the tyrannous societies and superstitious cultures that existed before the age of “modernity”.

Twenty years ago many writers still retained this faith. Their confident extrapolation for decades ahead—their readiness to take mid-20th-century social tendencies and cultural trends as likely to continue unchanged for another 40 or 50 years—is evidence of that. They did not display the unease and sense of historical *discontinuity* which people in many fields claim to be experiencing today. When they proclaimed “the end of ideology”, they show a belief that, in the last 300 years, modern philosophy and science had succeeded (in John Locke’s famous phrase) in “clearing away the underbrush that stands in the way of knowledge.” In their view, if we could only prevent ideological and theological issues from confusing matters, both the intellectual and the practical means of improving the human lot were ready to hand.

Today, the program of Modernity—even the very *concept*—no longer carries anything like the same conviction. If an historical era is ending, it is the era of Modernity itself. Rather than our being free to assume that the tide of Modernity still flows strongly, and that its momentum will carry us into a new and better world, our present position is less comfortable. What looked in the 19th century like an irresistible river has disappeared in the sand, and we seem to have run aground. Far from extrapolating confidently into the social and cultural future, we are now stranded and uncertain of our location. The very project of Modernity thus seems to have lost momentum, and we need to fashion a successor program.

To form reasonable and realistic “horizons of expectation” today, we must therefore begin by reconstructing an account of the circumstances in which the Modern project was conceived, the philosophical, scientific, social, and historical assumptions on which it rested, and the subsequent sequence of episodes that has led to our present quandary. When are we

to think of the "modern" era as originating? What ideas or assumptions, about nature or society, have lain at the foundation of the "modern" program for human improvement? And how has the Western imagination come to outgrow these ideas and assumptions? Those are the central questions we need to tackle in this book.

## What About

### Dating

Statements like "The  
resonate to than to us  
on the demise of modern  
it has not already happen  
word "modern", and jus

Raise these questions  
origin of modernity to  
moveable type; some to  
authority; others to 1648  
the American or French  
start for a few only in 18  
rise of "modernism" in  
to feel about the prosper  
despondent at its end an  
its departure with satis  
coming of "post-modern  
core of the "modern",  
"modern" world.

In one sense, the idea  
For advertisers of consu  
the latest thing, *le dern*  
are living in a consumpt  
motto—*semper aliquid*  
sense, the future brings  
other, so that Modernit