

TRICKLE-DOWN CIVILIZATION

By Michael Ventura

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In answer to the many queries, protests, squirms and screams (see this week's letter page) about my column "Blessed Are the Slick" ("demented," a dear friend called it), this is how one writer traveled to the sentence "I think civilization is a form of mass murder."

Once upon a time... say, 500 years ago... there was a place called Europe. By the standards of places like China, the Middle East and North Africa – where philosophy, mathematics and literature thrived – Europe was backward to the point of being retarded. Under the dictates of the Roman Catholic Church, the pursuit of knowledge in Europe had been stymied, censored and persecuted by torture and death for more than 1,000 years. (That's right, more than 1,000 years.) Endless little wars between feudal rulers kept everyone poor – European kings were poorer than most kings elsewhere, and European peasants were poorer than just about anyone. Between the church and the feudal system, Europe seemed doomed to stagnation.

Europeans were filthy. It was generally considered sinful to bathe – so, since being sinful could get you killed or imprisoned, people often went years without bathing. (This would continue for a time, in the New World, when some European Christians became New England Puritans: to some of them, a bath even once a month was looked on as a sinful pleasure and warranted severe censure.) Because of these attitudes, European cities and villages stank, life spans were pitifully short even for that time, and waves of disease decimated the population regularly.

Socially, most Europeans were ignorant slaves. The few books in existence were guarded by churches and royalty, and even these books were written in a language (Latin) controlled by the religious elite – a language few common people knew. Indeed, church services were performed in this language – their own holy texts were read to Europeans in a tongue they found incomprehensible! The peoples of Europe were literally owned by their rulers, and in many areas, had no authority over anything in their daily lives – commoners not only couldn't own land, most weren't even permitted to own their own tools. There were no "rights" as we think of them.

And there was no escape. Travel was dangerous for men and impossible for women – and, because most peasants were the property of their lords, it was de facto illegal. In any case, knowing only the dialect of your locality and having no wider knowledge or resources, where would you go?

In some cities things were slowly changing – merchants and trades people began at least to own the tools of their trade. But such changes were measured not by decades but by centuries. Violence was common. Medieval Paris, for instance, was as violent as any modern city. Dissent of any kind was punished brutally. For example, those who believed in religions that predated Christianity were called "witches" and slaughtered by the millions. (That's right: by the millions.) Small enclaves of Jews, mostly in Eastern Europe, were tolerated uneasily but often subject to sudden massacres, or "pogroms."

These conditions spawned many peasant uprisings – some quite effective for short periods, in small sections of the continent. But they were invariably put down by

coalitions of otherwise warring lords – and put down with a viciousness extraordinary even by the standards of this, the most vicious of continents.

Things tended to be more permissive the closer you got to the Mediterranean, where North Africa, the Middle East and even Asia were accessible influences. By the 1400s, people sensitive to these influences made some tiny scientific progress. Some Europeans began admitting what many elsewhere had long known: that they lived on a globe, and that instruments like the compass could help get them from one extreme of it to another. Also, from the Chinese, Europe had gleaned an unfortunate knowledge of gunpowder.

Incredibly, at this point in their history – circa 1500, with little more than their mastery of gunpowder and metals as an excuse and under the banner of religion whose morality permitted mass slaughter on scales unknown to most of the world – these barbarous people, the Europeans, decided that the planet was theirs for the taking and that it was their mission to “civilize” everyone on it.

It is important to remember that up to this time there was a natural balance between human beings and their environment. The beasts weren't intruding on the people, nor were the people intruding on the beasts. Humans ate and often sacrificed animals – and some animals, when they had the chance, ate humans. By and large, though, the tigers of China and India, the elephants of India and Africa, the wolves and bears of Europe and North America (and many other species that will likely be extinct by the end of your life) lived apart but not far from people, usually without conflict. This may have been because there was virtually no distinction between wilderness and non-wilderness – even in Europe, which except for Spain was an enormous thick forest. There were cities (quite small by our standards) and villages (even smaller), surrounded by some fields, and then... the world, with a road here and there running through it.

It wasn't Eden. Despite what the ecologists say, to be balanced with nature does *not* equate with sanity. In Africa, for instance, as in most of the Americas, a female was the possession of her father or her husband, to be bought, sold or traded – usually for livestock. (Many men today wax nostalgic about tribal life, initiation and such; women almost never do.) In the Mediterranean cultures, among others, slavery (by and of all races) had been an institution for thousands of years. And people warred with their neighbors everywhere, even in the most idyllic setting where there was no economic excuse. They gossiped. Gypped. Cooked up new atrocities to inflict when they got tired of the old ones. Just like us. It Wasn't Eden.

But there was no overpopulation anywhere. Floods, droughts and wars caused famines, migrations and other imbalances, but the basic equilibrium tended to restore itself. Even India (which had a ritualized underclass) and China (with thousands of years of “civilized” stratification) kept stable populations. Life was strenuous and difficult (as, in different ways, it continues to be), but in what is now called the Third World there were no “poor” as we know them.

“The poor”, as we know them, are basically an invention of European civilization – modified a bit, but not much, from the Roman Empire's Mediterranean civilization before it. (A parallel invention occurred in the civilization of China.) In fact, you do not find “the poor” in history except where you find “civilization” – for civilization is characterized by a certain number of people not having to work hard with their hands for a living, and who thus have time to pursue what are known as “the fruits of civilization.” These people have to be supported somehow, and “civilization” is what we call the

economic setup that supports them. From Roman times to ours, this translates into: many people, sometimes called “peasants” or “workers” (or, as we say in the United States, “consumers”, doing *more* work than they need to survive in order that a few may do less. Of course, people don’t volunteer for such sacrifice; they have to be conditioned to think that it’s inevitable; so the “civilized” have to keep a stratification in place that gives most people no option but to work for them.

But I’m getting ahead of my story.

Five hundred years ago, there was a man who called himself many names: Columbo, Colomo, Colom, Colón. He finally settled on Colón. He *never* called himself Columbus, even when he wrote letters in Latin. He was a mariner with some odd beliefs. For instance, he wrote: “The man who possess gold does all that he desires in the world, and can even send souls to Paradise.” In any case, we all know what Senor Colón did – he taught Europe that the Americas existed and, more importantly that the Americas had riches and were vulnerable to invasion.

The rape of what is now Latin America changed Europe utterly – and almost immediately. The enormous influx of wealth (which cost Europe almost nothing and cost the Americas everything) acted like a kind of economic and cultural cocaine. Incremental trends that had inched along for centuries swelled within decades into transformative, era-changing waves. With so much new capital available, commerce expanded incredibly. It was, in long-range effects, a revolution, ending the dominance of religion. The Church, which had kept Europe static and stupid for more than 1,000 years, split between Catholicism and a far more pragmatic, commerce-friendly Protestantism. As the spoils of the conquest fueled commerce, feudal lords lost power to the merchants and a “middle class” began to grow that was neither aristocratic nor peasant. In the meantime, a movement of art and thought called the Renaissance, which before the conquest was largely confined to a few small city-states on the Italian peninsula, was amplified by the new intellectual and economic excitement into a movement spanning the entire continent. The Renaissance’s direct descendent would be called “science” – meaning a unified field of knowledge rather than isolated discoveries. By the late 1700s, this descendent, science, would be creating new ways to direct and multiply the new wealth.

Most importantly, nations could afford to *be* nations. The church no longer held sway over government decisions, because Spain, England, France and Holland (which for a time was a major player, due solely to New World commerce) had access to resources far greater than had before been imagined – how else could a tiny place like England wield such clout, except by sucking up resources from elsewhere?

Within a century after Senor Colon’s voyages, Europe was well on its way to becoming “modern.” People at all levels were steadily more prosperous, more mobile, more literate and more free.

But there was a catch.

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