

# RELUCTANT EUROCENTRISM

*The Gulf War highlighted the ambivalent relationship of the Western Left to the Third World. Here, in a selection from his new English-language edition of essays, Hans Magnus Enzensberger casts doubt on the cult of solidarity.*

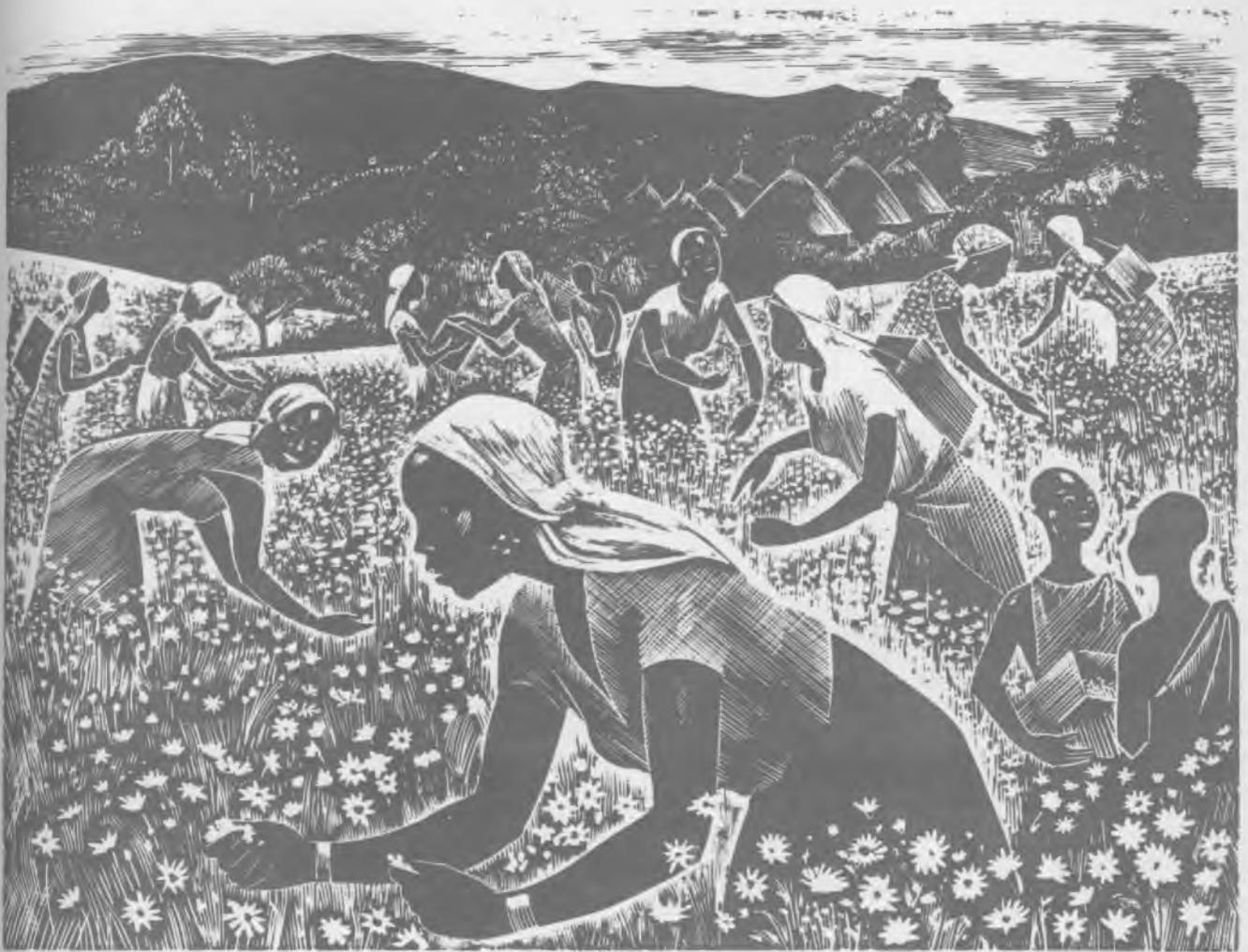
**T**he intellectual world has its own deadly sins, which are not to be found in the catechism. As if they didn't have their hands full with envy and gluttony, pride and fascination, the intellectuals are constantly inventing (and trespassing against) new prohibitions. Venerable and familiar names, like those listed in the confessional—sloth, avarice, pride—are out of the question as sins for the intelligentsia; they lack the high-quality scientific cachet, the watermark of abstraction.

Nor can the deviations of consciousness put in a claim for consecration by eternity. A wrathful god who would separate the white from the black sheep is not in sight, and the world spirit has fallen silent too. Rather, it's the watchdogs of whatever doctrine is dominant, if not indeed of fashion, who take care that the villain is exposed and the upright man is rewarded. So whoever sins intellectually, by no means risks eternal damnation. At worst he is reviled

for a while, pulled apart by critics or completely ignored. A few years or decades pass, a new register of sins is agreed upon, and the formerly depraved deviationist is rehabilitated. Anti-communism, for example, an aberration which was considered unforgivable among enlightened people for decades is today altogether socially acceptable again, indeed it is almost *de rigueur*.

It's quite a different matter, however, with the cardinal intellectual sin of the 70s, a mode of thought which bears the curious name Eurocentrism; its reprehensibility, I believe, remains unquestioned even today. The Europeans noticed quite early on that they are not alone in this world; and they turned this circumstance to their advantage quite early on. The history of our 'discoveries' consisted, as we know, of colonising the inhabitants of other continents, and that means conquering and robbing them.

Ethnology, a new science of humanity, owes its development to this bloody process. Its Anglo-Saxon representatives have introduced the ambitious name 'anthropology' for their subject, a variation which, for lack



of specialist knowledge, I would rather leave unexamined. After the seafarers and the soldiers, the adventurers and the missionaries, the planters and the engineers, the travelling scholars also fanned out in their turn, to discover what kind of peoples were to be converted and robbed, civilised and exterminated, there in the remotest regions of the earth.

The more intelligent among the anthropologists soon noticed that their researches were leading them into an epistemological and moral labyrinth. Because it was precisely what interested them most, the otherness of what used to be called the primitive peoples, the savages, the barbarians, the coloured races, which remained inaccessible, and that not only because the latter received them with a mistrust that was all too justified.

But the real hindrance to research was the researcher himself, together with his discipline. It was this, like everything else that the ethnologist brought with him—his gaze, his standards, his prejudices, his language—which placed itself between him and what he wanted to investigate, and so he ran the risk of bringing home only dead facts and living errors. His arrival alone was already a considerable invasion of the societies he wanted to observe, an interference factor of incalculable magnitude.

It is not surprising therefore that the booty of anthropological research consists largely of European fancies. It's our own reflection that perpetually appears on the projection screen of science; only we have no desire to recognise ourselves in it.

Ways of escaping ethnology's dilemma are few and risky. Of course, it is possible to postulate the equality of all human societies and to raise the demand that every community must be described and judged on the basis of its own conditions. But that is easier said than done. A consistent relativism assumes an observer who would be in a position to leave his own cultural baggage at home. Such a scientist would not only have to be a master of brainwashing, he would also have to be capable of using it on himself. Only then would he, as an ethnologist, be completely free of his 'European' prejudices—but along with them of his science as well.

Another way of solving the dilemma—it could be called the existential one—is to gamble one's own identity. The researcher becomes a kind of renegade. He joins his Melanesians, Nahuas, Malagasies in the bush. He goes native: that's what in their day the English colonial rulers called the irregular, unscientific form of such a change of identity. In anthropology, a mild version of this method is

described as 'participant observation'. The stranger adapts to the way of life he meets with, he tries to penetrate the mentality of the peoples with whom he is staying, by transforming himself into a Melanesian, Nahua, Malagasy.

It is evident that such experiments do not spirit away the original dilemma. They lead rather into an extensive maze of ambiguities. Because the researcher's transformation is an experiment with a time limit, an as-if, which once again divides him from his hosts. His ulterior motive remains intact. The anthropologist becomes an actor, a ventriloquist or a spy.

These are roles which a respectable academic finds difficult. Anthropology as a swings-and-roundabout of culture and identity: not all researchers would be prepared to come to terms with such a definition. A minority sought and found a way out of the dilemma in the politicisation of their discipline. They took the side of the oppressed and threatened peoples who were the object of their work. Some of these radical renegades saw the civilisation from which they came as the principal enemy of humanity. In accordance with the maxim 'the last shall be first', they believed in the future of the 'savages' and demonstrated their solidarity with them. And it was they who coined the term Eurocentrism and turned it polemically against their academic colleagues who preferred to remain what they were: professors in Uppsala and Göttingen, in Louvain, Cambridge and Paris.

All in all an esoteric business, one of those theoretical bones on which a small band of specialists gnaws in quiet and with some pleasure. So it might appear, and so indeed it was, until about 20 years ago. In the short period of time which has passed since then, the problem of Eurocentrism has irreversibly established itself in our consciousness—yes, one can say that in its most general and trivial form it has become a platitude.

The historical reasons are obvious. The collapse of European colonial rule in its traditional form, the liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America and the political, economic and ideological consequences of this global process have fundamentally altered our picture of the world.

We have learned that we are in the minority, and that those others, the majority, are not hanging around somewhere on the periphery of the inhabited world as passive objects of our economic interests and our scientific curiosity. Such knowledge is not gained voluntarily; it only establishes itself when there is no other possibility.

Only 30 years ago Europeans and North Americans could still ignore the most enormous events without much effort; the Chinese Civil War, the colonial massacres in Indonesia and Madagascar were only hazily noticed. That only changed with the Algerian war, the Cuban revolution, the conflict in the Near East and the wars in Indochina. The brightly coloured scenes from the cigarette card album, the wax figures in the ethnological museum came to life, they turned up in person in the living room. The TV screen teemed with evidence. A problem that until then a couple

of anthropologists had discussed in their tent or in a seminar, became the property of primary school teachers and leader writers, of social workers and parish priests.

Really understanding what was now on the agenda of history was another matter. That is obvious even from the attempts to give the state of affairs a name. The crudest terms were good enough to indicate the breach which had opened up before our eyes: over here the developed, over there the underdeveloped countries, over here the poor, over there the rich countries; and the confrontation between them was sometimes called the international class struggle, and sometimes, in the euphemistic vocabulary of Social Democracy, the North-South conflict. In a futile effort to label an explosion, the majority of the others in Asia, Africa and Latin America were given the name 'the Third World'.

That this was not a concept, but a portmanteau, a semantic all-purpose term, became clear in the 70s at the latest, when the oil-producing countries became the moguls of the world economy while in Africa and Indochina whole countries more or less starved.

Has there ever been a European who seriously believed that the yellow races were yellow? Did you really think that the Savages were savage, the Coloureds coloured, the Primitives primitive? Did you perhaps think that the explosion of the world could be numbered one, two and three? What can China and Niugini have in common, for example? If they have a common denominator at all, then it can only be defined negatively—and that is from our perspective: as lack. These people were missing something, whether it was history or development, a god or a state. And with that we have arrived at Eurocentrism again.

It's the commodities that tell the truth; the cassette recorders in the souks of Damascus, the Seiko watches in the shop windows of Peking, the jeans and the sunglasses, the whiskies, the perfumes and the cars. Above all, the cars. No victorious liberation front, no starving tropical country, no pedagogic dictatorship, no matter how puritanical, gets by without them. Electrically controlled sliding windows, air conditioning, tinted and bullet-proof glass, stereo, automatic locking devices—all inclusive.

This frenetic desire to imitate is a worldwide phenomenon whose implications no one has yet thought through to the end. Its effects are like those of a natural force, they are as irresistible and as little responsible to the control of reason as an avalanche. There has certainly been no shortage of attempts to analyse rationally the needs of poor and underdeveloped countries. Again and again intermediate technologies were proposed in order to relate the structures of traditional societies to the demands of industrialisation.

After years of work, the engineers of a European car company developed a vehicle adapted to the conditions of poor tropical countries. Built on a simple modular principle, it didn't need any care, was economical, easy to repair and handle; it was also cheap, since all unnecessary accessories

were missing. This car never went into production, since the countries concerned firmly refused to drive cheaper cars than the French or the Americans.

This confidence, or rather this lack of confidence, is not only to be observed in the drawing-board states of Central Africa; even great nations with a great past are not free from it. In China a luxury limousine is still being manufactured today which matches in every detail a Russian vehicle from the 50s which, in its turn, is copied from a 40s American Packard. This copy of a copy moreover bears the name 'Red Flag'.

*"Every chair, every bottle of lemonade, is a slavish imitation of a foreign model"*

On its sky-blue cover the Shanghai telephone directory shows happy people gazing at a sky which is pierced by television towers, rockets and satellites. The text is interspersed with black and white adverts and coloured plates in which European-looking models display European women's fashions. The pieces of furniture are exact copies of those splay-legged side-tables, dressing tables and wardrobes which we remember from the Adenauer era. The whole book is a slim version of the Neckermann mail-order catalogue of 1957.

Now I haven't the least wish to poke fun at this evidence of Chinese modernisation policy. It's much too depressing for that. What makes one's heart sink is not the fact that the population of a poor country is insisting gently but with elementary force on an improvement in its living standards, but the path of compulsive imitation that it adopts in doing so. It seems as if every mistake, every whim, every folly of the West has to be repeated, as if no deformation, no wrong turning can be left out.

Every chair, every bottle of lemonade, is a slavish imitation of a foreign model, as if it would be unthinkable to invent something of one's own, even if only a new reading-lamp or radio cabinet. It's inevitable that the copy is inferior to the original. It's not only the shortage of materials, and the industrial shortcomings that ensure that this is so; rather it's in the nature of the process itself, that the out of date, the stale and the shabby triumphs whenever a society puts up with living at second hand.

But, you will object, a society doesn't consist of commodities. Let the Chinese and the Peruvians, the Congolese and the Pakistanis make themselves comfortable however they like; the main thing is that they manage to get hold of the most essential things of all that a human being needs in order to live, a pair of shoes, a bowl of food, a doctor who can bind their wounds. No one can dispute that. But the commodities propagate something beyond their immediate consumption. At just that point at which each person

has his shoes, his bowl, his surgeon—and this goal has been achieved in China—they prophesy the future victory of a single culture. But this culture is not Chinese.

Or do you think it doesn't make any difference whether someone carries out calculations with an abacus or with a computer? What happened to us at that moment when we sat down behind a steering wheel for the first time, alone, in our own car? Our tools, machines and products have altered us beyond recognition. Our idiotic architecture, our supermarkets, our three-room apartments, our cosmetics, our television programs which are spreading across the whole world are only individual elements of an evidently irresistible totality.

We've experienced more than one fiasco with 'the iron laws of history', but a person who watches television is very different from someone who listens to stories. A marxist thesis, which no one has yet refuted, says that the unfettered productive forces of capitalist industry make short shrift of every recalcitrant legacy, every autonomous 'superstructure'. They are the bulldozer of world history which clears away everything which blocks its way and levels every traditional culture.

And the commodities, appliances and machines are only the most visible part of what the 'developing countries' import. We supply them with weapons and toxins, techniques of government and propaganda. Even the symbols of their sovereignty are slavish imitations of what they believe they have liberated themselves from through bloody struggles; the idea of the nation, the slogans of the revolution, the concept of the party, the emblems of statehood from national anthem to constitution, from flag to protocol. The *idee fixe* of progress is increasingly being questioned by Europeans and North Americans; it dominates unchallenged only in the 'developing countries' of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The true Eurocentrics are the others.

It is probably fair to say that there is a lot of cant in Western anti-imperialist discourse. There is, by now, a long tradition of self-criticism in our part of the world, particularly on the Left. Ever since the beginning of the 20th century, it has been commonplace to complain about the decadence of Western civilisation, a thesis which has strong roots in conservative thought. Marxist theory has emphasised the economic exploitation of colonial and ex-colonial societies which live by pilfering the Third World. 'We are rich because they are poor'. In the course of time the myth of the Noble Savage has been resurrected in the shape of tiers-mondisme. The polemic against 'consumerism' has been a mainstay of the opposition ever since the 60s. Inevitably, idealist notions engender a rhetoric rich in banality and bad faith. An opposition based on them may be subjectively well meant, but sooner or later it is bound to founder because there is no mediation between its 'convictions' and the social reality which it seeks to transform. The result is, even from a strictly moral point of view, painfully ambiguous: the Left is just as Eurocentric as the rest of us. Its only distinction is a bad conscience, reluctant Eurocentrism.

Others, however, and perhaps they are the best among us, take a different decision. I'm not thinking about the drilling engineers in their air-conditioned ghettos, or the businessmen in their private jets, or the mercenaries, policemen and marines, but about the doctors on the Cambodian border and the agronomists in the Sahel; about people who have given up their three-room apartments in Wuppertal or St Louis in order to train mechanics somewhere in the bush or sink wells in the desert.

The readiness to render spontaneous, altruistic aid appears so strange under prevailing conditions that one responds with perplexity to such non-conformists. Some admire them, others call them, with a certain dubious respect, idealists. Yet others shake their heads or even believe them to be unsuspecting tools of some imperialist plot.

That is always unjust and usually wrong. Nevertheless, it is still necessary to enquire about the inner motives and the meaning of that solidarity with the 'Third World' that stirs here and there in the industrial countries of the West. Official development aid doesn't need to concern us any further; its political and economic goals are not secret after all. It is a matter of spheres of influence, raw materials, export interests. The development policies of every industrial power East or West are the continuation of colonial policies by other means.

Anyone, on the other hand, who risks his life as a doctor in order to dress the wounds of rebels or refugees in some African civil war has something else in mind; and something of this larger interest is also to be found among those who have stayed at home, working on obscure committees to raise money for imprisoned trade unionists in Bolivia. The self-deceptions to which such a commitment can lead are well known, and it's also no secret that the ritual playing of Chilean protest songs in Berlin bars had no noticeable influence on the bloody course of events in that country.

But independently of that, of how seriously or half-heartedly, of how effectively or how ineffectively the helpers of the 'Third World' may go to work, they are agreed on one point, and this point is the decisive one: they all identify themselves with a cause which is not their own. In this respect, they are the successors of those ethnologists who understood themselves as cultural renegades. The Dane who makes the problems of the Eskimos his own, the student from Massachusetts who organises a lobby for the defence of the Brazilian Indians: all these people want to help not only others but themselves too, and this is completely legitimate.

One could perhaps call what they are looking for among those distant peoples the utopian minimum. The stubborn hope which they place in the future of the 'Third World' corresponds to their scathing critique of the society which produced them and which has consumed any utopian surplus. The ideological shreds of marxism or religion in which some of them clothe their search cannot conceal the fact that the goal of this search is to find the 'completely other'.

But what if this 'completely other' doesn't exist? These peoples, proud of their own traditions, unhampered by 'consumerism', less decadent and ruined, but older, purer, less corruptible than we are, pursuing their own project despite sacrifices and hardships—perhaps they exist only in the imagination of those who are looking for them?

And does this search not also have a disagreeable side? Does it not reproduce the old dilemma of the anthropologist, forever confronted by his own ghosts in the stranger's mirror. Is the 'Third World' in the end nothing more than a projection?

At any rate, there's something odd about the enthusiasm with which many visitors from the industrialised world regard the spartan features of some 'liberation movements'. Someone who, having flown 4000 miles, enthuses about the unique dignity of the rice farmers cultivating their fields with their bare hands standing knee deep in the mud, deserves to have his behaviour called moral cretinism rather than solidarity. And what about the iron social control, the sexual repression, the dull-witted formalism, the bureaucratic despotism which weighs upon large parts of the underdeveloped world? We can't judge that from our position, these are transitional phenomena, the people there have different needs...Admittedly that wouldn't be right for us, but in their circumstances...And so on.

Is that not the most naked racism masked as sympathy? Is it asking too much for an American in Angola, a Swede in China, a German in Cuba, to say to himself, at least once a day, as an experiment: These people are just like us? And that means that they do not only want schools and hospitals, canteens and barracks. They want to choose their profession just like us. They want to love one another. They want to have the choice. They want to have freedom of movement. They want to think for themselves and make decisions for themselves. And apart from that they want machines instead of flails, cars instead of hand-carts, refrigerators, holiday trips, telephones, three-room apartments. Just like us.

Since the abandonment of the last alternative project of history, that of Mao Zedong, only one future seems still to be left. The peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America have fallen under the spell of a universal cargo cult: everything new, whether for good or ill, comes from the industrial countries, and everything old must be sacrificed to the new.

But the massive approval which our civilisation receives does not fill us with triumph. On the contrary, it disappoints us, irritates us, makes us uneasy. We have no desire to be number one. We long ago got out of the habit of regarding Europe as the navel of the world, and we find the idea that the future of the human race could resemble a migration of lemmings led by us altogether depressing.

There are several reasons, subjective and objective, good and bad, why we don't like to be confronted by the Eurocentrism of the underdeveloped. It is not an uplifting thought to be flag-bearers of a civilisation whose catastrophic potential becomes more obvious year by year.

It has never been the case before in history that humanity has staked everything on a single card. To a certain extent it lived scattered in a great number of autonomous cultures, each one pursuing its own project. Looked at in that way, the Tower of Babel had its positive side: far from coming to terms with one another, a multiplicity of societies evolved, inventing specific solutions for their own survival. With the industrial revolution this diversity began to disappear. Its last remnants are being liquidated before our eyes. That's not only sad, it's very dangerous; because the more homogeneous a population is, the more susceptible it is to catastrophes and the gloomier are its prospects for the future.

Besides, it's as good as certain that our able successors in the poorer countries are backing the wrong horse. A simple computer projection of their needs and of the resources which would be required to generalise the material standards of the Western industrial countries demonstrates the hopelessness of such an undertaking. Three billion cars, 400 million tons of meat, 40 million gigawatt hours of electricity, 12 billion tons of oil per annum. The planet which is our home can't provide all that. The consequences of unchanged targets are wars of distribution, extortion, vast conflicts. The 'Third World's' enthusiastic willingness to learn does not only worry us for noble reasons. The closer industrial progress gets to the ecological limits of capacity, the more our civilisation resembles a zero-sum game: one player's gain is another's loss.

But the existence of the others with projects that weren't ours, the existence of fundamentally different cultures somewhere out there in the jungle, in the taiga, in the desert, was also a psychological comfort to the 'civilised' of the earth. These distant neighbours meant a relief from the strain. They allowed us to dream of another, lost life. Whenever the price we had to pay for progress was hurting us, we thought of the others, savages, blacks, bedouins, orientals, nomads, Eskimos, hunters, Malays, inhabitants of mythical islands; the naive patchwork of a colourful humanity, that was different from us, and with whom our disappointed hopes found an ambiguous refuge. We imposed upon the others what our own industrialised existence denied us, desires, promised lands, utopias. This method of projection is deeply rooted in the European tradition. I even believe that the internationalism of the Left in Europe and North America derives for the greatest part from such sources. So the revolutionary hope which has come to nothing is transferred further and further into the distance, first to Russia and Central Asia, then to China and to the so-called Third World.

It is time to take leave of such dreams. It was always an illusion that liberation could be delegated to the faraway others; today this self-deception has become a threadbare evasion. An exotic alternative to industrial civilisation no longer exists. We are encircled and besieged by our own limitations.

Their worries are different from ours. How does a poor country achieve primary accumulation? How can an unstable nation be consolidated? How can steel production

be increased? How can agriculture be mechanised? These are questions which were on the agenda in Europe and North America a hundred years ago. It is part of the fateful inheritance of the underdeveloped countries that they are unable to set themselves any historically new problems. That is a consequence of their situation and not, as the incorrigible racists among us imagine, of some kind of original inferiority.

It is the West that remains, spreading out in every direction. The new problems are being posed here, and here alone, and here alone are to be found, sparingly enough, the new solutions. Not too much has occurred to us in recent decades: apart from birth control, ecology, feminism, they have been, above all, technological tricks—microcomputers, means of communication, and decisive steps in basic research, principally in molecular biology.

But perhaps, behind our backs as it were, something else has happened that would be much more momentous. Perhaps that savage, distant, brightly coloured diversity which was external to our civilisation has immigrated into its centres. The increasing dangerousness of everyday life in the great cities of the West would be one indication of that. The more the exotic is eliminated worldwide and the more traditional diversity is made to conform, the more the industrial societies become a patchwork internally. Not only the United States, but also France, Sweden, West Germany are melting pots today, multi-racial states. Ethnic minorities, subcultures, political and religious sects establish themselves in the metropolises. This unpredictable confusion is not only a result of immigration from outside, its roots lie in the same historic continent that gave birth to industrial growth.

The vitality of the West derives, in the end, from the negativity of European thinking, its eternal dissatisfaction, its voracious unrest, its lack. Doubt, self-criticism, self-hate, even, are its most important productive forces. It's our strength that we can't accept ourselves and what we have produced. That's why we regard Eurocentrism as a sin of consciousness. Western civilisation lives from whatever calls it into question, whether it's barbarians or anarchists, Red Indians or Bolsheviks. And if a cultural other is no longer available, then we just produce our own savages; technological freaks, political freaks, psychic freaks, cultural freaks, moral freaks, religious freaks. Confusion, unrest, ungovernability are our only chance. Disunity makes us strong.

From now on we have to rely on our own resources. No Tahiti is in sight, no Sierra Maestre, no Sioux and no Long March. Should there be such a thing as a saving idea, then we'll have to discover it for ourselves.

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