PESSIMISM AS WORLDVIEW

Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright (1916-2003) is one of the foremost logicians of the 20th century, whose status was truly set in stone when he succeeded Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) at Cambridge. Outside the action typologies, von Wright’s logic is too technical and too deep into the realm of analytic philosophy for me to fully understand. But then it is not as an analytical philosopher that I have read and been moved by Georg Henrik von Wright since the age of seventeen.

While still in high school, I read his Tanke och förkunnelse [Thought and prophecy] (1955), a book about Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) and Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-81). This reading experience was for me a watershed. Von Wright appeared as a philosopher who understood that logic alone could not give meaning to life. I felt his gravity. Life became an important thing.

But I believe von Wright’s methods also fascinated me from the start. He framed his thinking with the help of fiction writers, engaged in dialog with them even though they were dead; he knew that Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky had experienced fundamental things about humanity’s existential being and about history. A humanist philosophy unfurled; thought in which history played a starring role and had to do with worldviews.

I began my post-graduate education in the late 1970s by reading von Wright’s Explanation and Understanding. It was not easy. But I still believe it was worth the effort: I have since been equipped to discuss similarities and differences between the sciences and the humanities. It was fascinating reading for a humanist who had once wanted to be a scientist, but had taken a different path. Today I am, parenthetically speaking, more interested in looking at scholarship as one culture and not, like von Wright, two. I am keen to emphasize that which unites all scholarly reflection, whether oriented toward the nomothetic (established in law, causally determined) or idiographic (unique, controlled by intention) processes. I believe the seminar is the common ground.

However, Georg Henrik von Wright is known, read, and influential primarily for his moralist works in a third genre: criticism of the modern world, written in Swedish and during the last third of his life. His most important critical examinations of civilization are Humanismen som livshållning [Humanism as worldview], Vetenskapen och förföljel [Science and reason], Myten om framsteget [The myth of progress] and Att förstå sin samtid [Understanding one’s own time].

Von Wright’s books, along with the ecosophical works of his colleague Arne Næss (1912-2009), are certainly the most widely discussed Nordic contributions to the discussion of the value of our form of civilization. It is perhaps no great
surprise that two such “poet philosophers” began their careers in the spirit of logical positivism. The logic is as sharp as a knife and one might say this is a philosophy made for the technological society – but I do not at all believe that to be true. Næss’s Empirisk semantik (1961) [English translation: Communication and Argument: Elements of Applied Semantics, 1966] and von Wright’s Den logiska empirismen [Logical empirism] (1943) for example, are still fertile ground for readers who want to develop their skeptical side and soberly scrutinize that which is routinely held true. Philosophy and the strict analysis of argumentation here become tools available to everyone and ultimately for the sake of democracy. The new democratic society needs philosophy, as both von Wright and Næss presciently thought, because democracy needs to keep critical skepticism alive. Such skepticism can of course also lead to ecosophy.

In the last ten years of his life, Georg Henrik von Wright came to be regarded as a role model, or perhaps more accurately as “the Humanist”. As Wittgenstein’s successor and world-renowned philosopher, he spoke to us from an incredibly authoritative position, and his writing style was characterized by linguistic elegance and superb understanding. What he says in his works of critical examination of civilization is not at all difficult to assimilate – quite the reverse, in fact.

Von Wright thus embodied the humanist, but more than anyone else, he also gave humanism the face of pessimism. Are humanism and pessimism then the same? With both will and feeling, I find it easy to answer yes – and I do not think I would have to look very far to find support for and compatriots in that belief. But for this very reason, I believe it is important to continue arguing about the intellectual grounds that are the basis of this worldview. Is humanism also pessimism about reason, and not only about will and feeling? Von Wright is probably a better touchstone for this question than anyone else.

Von Wright’s dim view comes from a highly personal perspective and not only the analytical and philosophical. I believe the personal here is universal. This became increasingly obvious and disturbing to me when von Wright’s last work, his memoirs, was published. This is why this critical observation of a worldview alludes to his most famous book. And so we proceed to Pessimism as Worldview.

Two dubious hypotheses

Georg Henrik von Wright’s thinking on civilization can be most easily summed up by saying that he formulates two hypotheses about our time and that on the grounds of these hypotheses he makes two highly provocative predictions about the future of our civilization. I will begin with a brief presentation of the hypotheses and the predictions; thereafter I consider the risks involved in this
drastic thinking, anything unreasonable in it, and a possible explanation for why von Wright’s pessimism is so unilateral.

The first hypothesis: Our culture is dominated by instrumental reason, reason that is technical, oriented toward finding the most efficient method to do something. According to von Wright, this instrumental reason displaces the value questions, makes them irrelevant. We ask ourselves less and less often what is the point of change, what is the value of change. For this reason, change has automatically come to be regarded as improvement, as progress. But it is not at all certain that this is so; the situation is in von Wright’s view, the opposite: progress and belief in progress are a myth that obscures what is actually going on. Progress is, like the emperor in the face of honest common sense, naked.

Modern technology, like broadband and computers, writes von Wright, is assigned intrinsic value in our civilization. But he personally has discovered that technology disrupts “the natural rhythm of life. The flow of information confuses us. It compels fast decisions and opinions, which perhaps exceed the human being’s biologically determined prerequisites for reacting to external impressions. The consequence is frustration, anxiety, and stress.” He further maintains that the new technology “becomes an end in itself, whose accomplishment may counteract the purposes information and communication are meant to serve.”

I do not know whether this first of Georg Henrik von Wright’s hypotheses is true, or if it can be empirically tested. In any case, I find it too categorically stated. Imagine, for instance, something as pleasant as love. In the pre-modern society, love, or at least its institutional manifestation, marriage, was handled precisely with instrumental reason, as a means to another end. Marriage was a means to achieve other reasonable goals, such as efficient production, greater power, or peaceful social coexistence. Today, love has in many respects, and contrary to von Wright’s assumption, been entirely liberated from the domain of instrumental reason. These days, even royalty marry for love. Only marginalized royalist ideologues find it reasonable to demand that princes and princesses sacrifice their personal desires on the altar of instrumental reason.

It seems even clearer to me that instrumental reason has lost ground even within what has become the core of modern politics – education, healthcare, and social services. And with the rise of the welfare states, it has of course become completely unreasonable to maintain, like von Wright, that the modern, affluent, western world is incompatible with human biology. It would be more accurate to say that the black death of the Middle Ages or starvation in the most technologically and economically underdeveloped countries of our day are incompatible with our biology.
I suspect that von Wright the philosopher has made a common error, as he seems to presume that technical/scientific modernization has nothing to do with humanist gains and that cultural modernization – and thus spiritual values – have thus had to take a back seat. In any case, it seems to me entirely legitimate to pose a counter-hypothesis: The modernization process has strongly contributed to the ejection of instrumental reason from areas where it has no place, and modernization has celebrated triumphs where its particular reason truly comes into its own.

The second hypothesis: Many argue that the modern era is shaped by continuous development along a time axis, popularly expressed in the axiom “little by little, in every way, things get better and better every day”. Von Wright instead ascribes to a cyclical view of history, rather than a linear one. Such a von Wrightian perspective was probably predominant among our historical philosophers until the 19th century. History was thought to be a matter of gradual worsening and decline – something that followed the pattern of a circle.

Plato argued that our déjà-vu experiences were real in the sense that we actually recalled things that had once occurred. And even thicker on the ground are those who have defended degeneration theories in various guises: In the beginning were paradise and golden ages, when humankind lived in health and harmony, only to thereafter degenerate by stages to bronze and iron, to the Fall and pain.

More specifically, von Wright connects his thinking on history to the most extreme and famous proponent of such beliefs, Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) and his book, The Decline of the West. Von Wright characterizes our time thusly:

The present thus seems an end point that one has reached when certain inherent potencies have been drained and the satisfaction given by their realization has begun to mix with doubt and self-criticism, leaving room for a sense of discord and fatigue. We are in such a position now. The West is tired. /…/When the fellowship of values breaks apart and the pressure of tradition is weakened – familiar phenomena in our age – a culture loses its identity, its peculiarity, becomes “vulgar” and wastes away. The disappearance of a culture need not be a “violent death”. It may also be a last “whimper” to paraphrase an oft-quoted word by T S Eliot.

I will soon exemplify this with some of the factors that von Wright believes underlie these losses of potency and identity. But on the other hand, I believe that on this point von Wright is not particularly interested in empirical reasoning and evidence for the decline hypothesis. This seems to me more of a notion about the necessary course of history and a translation of humankind’s inevitable development from birth to death to the collective fate of humankind, of civilization. A socialization of personal destiny, if you will.
And with that, onward to von Wright’s two provocative predictions.

Two controversial predictions

Von Wright is not often concrete, but his predictions are. The first talks about our relationship to the natural world. Von Wright as a critic of civilization holds that in its technological hubris, Western civilization is destroying the earth with toxins and gases, that the ozone layer is being depleted, and that we are acting in a way that fundamentally disrupts the ecological balance. This is exacerbated by our reckless exploitation of finite natural resources. He claims that our lifestyle cannot be reproduced in time or space. It cannot be made universal – the resources are not enough. The Chinese cannot have as many refrigerators as we do, Indians not as many rolls of toilet paper, and future generations cannot live like we do and in our material excess. We have enriched ourselves at the expense of the Third World and of our descendents. By extension, we are seeing indications of a hardening global struggle for shrinking natural resources – the final nuclear war that determines the fate of humankind becomes its end point.

Von Wright’s second concrete prediction is that the earth will be destroyed – and that rather soon. He even said, though later recanted, that from a cosmic perspective, the destruction “means no more than a pipeful of snuff to me”, or in other words nothing. In Vetenskapen och förnuftet [Science and reason] he writes:

I believe it is useful to be aware of the realism in the apocalyptic perspective opening before us. Animal species have come into being and have died out. Homo sapiens is surely no exception from the law of corruptibility that applies to all living things /…/ Humankind will one day surely vanish from the earth and it may be useful to remember that this day may be closer than we think…For my part, I cannot find this especially upsetting. Considering how many species humans have exterminated, such a nemesis of nature may seem just.

This prediction sparked quite a commotion. On one level, I can find the reaction remarkable. Obviously, humankind will vanish from the earth and our sun will someday die like other suns. This thought could make anyone sad. Perhaps it was precisely because von Wright is not sad that readers were so dismayed. He instead saw the extermination of humankind as a species as just and well-deserved. And he connected the fall not only to cosmic necessity, but also to the hubris of humankind. In any case, the apocalypse will not occur due to the absolutes of nature, but as a consequence of our own actions. Our technological hubris is punished unmercifully by the nemesis of nature – and for us, it is far too late to repent.

In his criticism of civilization, von Wright discusses two modernization processes: the economic and the scientific/technical. But he has surprisingly
little interest in the third revolution of modernity, the cultural. For example, he takes not the slightest notice of the fact that both his hypotheses and both his predictions have been articulated many times and under various conditions in our history. All of his predecessors have been wrong in their predictions (so far, or if they set a date). That alone, I believe, should be reason enough for reflection and deeper analysis.

But first and foremost, von Wright seems virtually uninterested in perhaps the most important element of this cultural modernization, the founding of democracies and the communicative revolution it has entailed. He is, in short, not the least bit preoccupied with analyzing modernization that is not about economic growth or economism, that is not about science, technology, and instrumental reason, but instead about greater civil participation, the democratic knowledge culture, popular movements and general education, enfranchisement and emancipation …

The dark shadow of the state of exception

I do not think it unfair to say that von Wright is an unusually categorical “crisis thinker”. To his mind, civilization is in crisis, reason has fallen into the hands of thieves, modernity has capsized, progress is an illusion. In reality, we are on the edge of destruction, and our political, economic, and scientific authorities are, consciously or unconsciously, hoodwinking us. From this perspective, democracy and equality do not seem the most important issues to discuss. If we are living in a state of exception, questions of democracy become a luxury. And democracy hardly seems the solution if you believe yourself to be living in a life-threatening crisis. The opposite is more likely, especially if there is reason to believe that political leaders are ignorant, recalcitrant, and perhaps even malevolent. Democratic decision processes take time, a long time, and one cannot rely on the citizenry being in possession of correct analyses of civilization. Or as von Wright puts it, “that the complications of the industrial and technologized society are so great that democratic participation in public decision processes must in the end degenerate into an empty formality of either agreement or protest in the face of incomprehensible alternatives”. In my opinion, von Wright’s thinking had much more interesting democratic potential when he was a logical positivist in the 1940s and 1950s than when he became an interpreter of the age in the 1980s and 1990s.

Citizen influence and public opinion are banned in a state of exception – albeit for the (possibly putative) public good. When a factual – not only mental – state of emergency is declared, it is almost always in connection with war, class struggle, or natural disaster. In these cases, one can rather quickly determine
whether it was reasonable to declare the state of emergency and whether it had the desired positive result. Things are different in the mental state of exception. It is shaped, I believe, by how the “crisis philosopher” represents the present as an acute, life-threatening crisis – but that citizens in general do not at all perceive the situation thus (which they do in genuine states of emergency). The “discerning mind” demands radical action that citizens feel no need for. I believe it is obvious that it is sometimes reasonable - and has been good – to act on the basis of the minority’s superior understanding of the long-term truth. But to change an entire civilization’s lifestyle, consumption patterns, habits … on that basis is something else. It is only afterwards one can ask whether it was worth the enormous risks and costs, it is only afterwards that one can determine whether the future scenario that constituted the basis for the action was reasonable.

I believe one can justifiably criticize “state of exception” thinkers, in general, from the democratic perspective. They constantly risk fomenting movements from which there is no guarantee anything good will come. They rarely think that the actions they demand – or induce – to prevent disaster also have major, unforeseen, and unwanted consequences, sometimes of a more serious kind than the disasters the interventions were intended to forestall.

Consciously and unconsciously, the disaster scenarist also constantly plays a trump card in the debate that the democrat cannot use: If you do not do as I say, it will all go to hell and we have no time to hesitate and slowly test the sustainability of your arguments. If you contradict me, I will brand you irresponsible.

I will try to express something particularly important to me in a couple of short sentences. This is an insight seldom put forth (not even in the more intellectual debate surrounding von Wright) and one that never reaches the most influential arenas of the public conversation, but it is one of extraordinary significance to its carriers and communicators:

*The fundamental affirmation of the future*

Apocalyptic visions and states of exception divert attention and strip mundane effort, the ongoing, successive, prudent, and searching endeavor to improve our earthly lives, of its fundamental value. These peaceful endeavors, always performed far from light of public scrutiny, definitely end up in the shadows when the spectacular exceptions and the more inflammatory battle-cries of the urgent, life-threatening crises grab the public attention. Compared to the disaster, they are no more interesting than a cup of instant soup.

But even more important, if that is possible, is that the disaster philosophers almost always ignore the fundamentals. They lack the imagination and capacity,
the will and knowledge, to visualize all the possibilities people of the future will have gathered to manage the difficult issues of the day. The problems and dilemmas of the day will be resolved and managed in the future using methods that are today unknown – avenues created in the permanent revolution that is the purview of economics, science, technology, and culture. Disaster theorists say instead that the race has been run, or that tomorrow’s problems must be solved using today’s methods.

Hundreds of years of experience contradict this notion: Science, technology, and culture will release human creativity whose results are today beyond our ken. In fifty or a hundred years, the technical, scientific, and conceptual prerequisites for handling the threats of the time will be completely different than they are today. Threats will be forestalled, new ones will emerge, others will take on reasonable proportions. Nor do I believe it is unusual for distinguished philosophers (like von Wright) to become temporal egocentrics when they think about the future.

This is the hope, the trust, the optimism: the foundations of everyday values and the importance of personal effort. The understanding that I am contributing to the unknown possibilities of the future is of course particularly worthy of preserving and considering when we talk about future, not yet realized, crises (such as climate change), although it can also be a source of calm and comfort in ongoing crises (such as the AIDS epidemic in Africa). It is with troubled concern that I see von Wright’s pessimism appearing in the more impactful public headlines. There, the not yet realized possibilities of the future are not even a category of thought. I believe that Candide, the optimist, and Pangloss, the pessimist, are both wrong and make mirror-image errors:

Both the optimist and the pessimist are quite often moralizers. Or to put it more brutally: Candide sees, so to speak, only forcibly sterilized, lobotomized people in the hands of the social state’s eugenics engineers; Pangloss sees only progress-serving scientists who put contraceptive pills in the hands of girls and supply the melancholy with Prozac. Pangloss is preoccupied with our age, which constantly makes so many new things possible to do. Candide is horrified and talks about the “risk society” that has become the consequence of putting sophisticated technology in the hands of imperfect humans. This negative or positive moralizing about the contemporary age is in danger of hiding the essential: Candide does not understand that human scope to act has always been limited. He condemns the contemporary age – or for that matter history – without asking whether there might really be other, better alternatives waiting in the wings. Pangloss is incapable of seeing the problematic elements of our expanding scope of action. He represses the unavoidable fact that modernization and political action are always accompanied by unintended, negative
consequences. *In the first case, today seems worse than it is; in the second, the future seems better than it turns out to be.*

*A person is behind the issue*

As I see it, von Wright’s pessimism thus rests on two dubious and empirically non-testable hypotheses: that instrumental reason has won across the board, and that the notion of progress is a bluff which is concealing the lost vitality of our civilization. And on two controversial and likewise dubious predictions: that natural resources are finite and the struggle for them is going to lead to catastrophic, global war, and that the earth will be destroyed as a consequence of humankind’s technological hubris and unrestrained exploitation of nature.

However, these hypotheses and predictions are so obviously weak and, as we have seen, easy to criticize, even to reject as pure speculation, that one might wonder whether they were not put forth mainly as positive provocation: Look what might happen if we do not listen to reason and more cogently reflect about the course and meaning of modernization processes. This may be so. Some of von Wright’s interpreters have perceived him thus, as a false doomsday prophet who used his rhetoric to bring humankind to their senses and thus save the world from its fate. But he cannot be understood *only* thus.

For me, trying to understand another person’s thinking as a manifestation of the person, of the biographical, is truly an exception. But sometimes I think there might be something to Strindberg’s view that there is actually a person behind every issue. In von Wright’s case, this person-centricity has generally swollen his influence: He incarnated and still embodies the wise, judicious man. He gave pessimism a face. And so he came to further reinforce a tenacious thought figure, one that sees the humanist as a pessimist who doubts human capacity to create a good society – a reasonably peaceful and fair society – and which on extremely few occasions entices people to do *everything* they can imagine and visualize.

But after having critically read his work, it seems obvious to me that von Wright’s alienation in modernity is *not only* based on rational deliberations and cool-headed analysis of the state of the world. I believe his alienation is also connected to an emotional reaction to the communicative revolution, to the breakthrough of ordinary people – or as von Wright could probably have said in chorus with José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), to the rising of the masses.

Georg Henrik von Wright’s last book was his memoir, *Mitt liv som jag minns det* [*My life as I remember it*]. It depicts an utterly fortunate and privileged life: the life of the roving aristocrat, of intellectual exchange at the very highest levels, a life in the academic and cultural elite. It is fascinating reading. Von Wright is a sympathetic man and he treats young, gifted doctoral students with
great respect and affection. This has – rightfully so, of course – contributed to his fine academic reputation. But the few times he talks about encounters with people outside academia, or reflects over the democratization process, he makes the hair on my forearms stand up.

I am not thinking primarily about how von Wright found no reason to oppose the Nazi threat, or that he, as an eighteen-year-old youth, could look favorably upon Hitler’s new Germany. He says this himself and acknowledges it calmly. On one level, I agree with him that this is not much to get excited about, “a pipeful of snuff” as he used to write: It would be something else to not get involved in the struggle against Hitlerism after the Night of Broken Glass in 1938, that is, after the point when no one could misinterpret what was coming and what was happening. While maintaining a cautiously indifferent or quietly hopeful attitude in the years between 1933 and 1936 was certainly not honorable, it was on the other hand completely understandable, since no one knew what was going to happen. But the memoirs nonetheless do not leave me in peace. There is something else that chafes, bothers me, makes me feel troubled and uneasy. His memoirs reflect a seemingly unconscious and unexamined aversion to the advances of the masses. I believe the people are mentioned only twice in his memoirs. Von Wright can no longer defend himself, so I will have to let him speak for himself about the consequences of the rising of the masses:

He travels through Europe in 1946 and notes that travel at the time had its good sides. His reason: “The lemming migrations of tourists up and down our part of the world had not yet begun” (emphasis mine). And in 1980, he and his wife stop sailing in the archipelago. “Elisabeth and I stopped sailing in 1980 when we thought the once incredibly beautiful and peaceful archipelago of the sea and fairways around Åland had started to get crowded”. The aristocrat is obviously troubled by democratization and growing equality. It disturbs him. He wants to be alone, unsoiled and untouched by the masses, like Zarathustra on the mountain.

But even more remarkable is that von Wright the humanist is sometimes prepared to utterly abandon the idea of inviolable human value. Just before the war broke out in 1939, he is sitting and talking to Wittgenstein:

I once asked Wittgenstein whether Europe needed a new major war. “Not just one, but two or three,” he answered. He shocked me and I found his opinion incomprehensible. It was not until much later that I learned to understand it.

Thus, to understand that civilization can and should sacrifice millions of individuals for the sake of a greater thing. Or when he sets out to describe the state of the modern, liberal democratic world, which goes like this:
Naked power now reigns supreme in our world. That it masquerades behind talk of human rights and humanitarian actions makes its actions yet more shameful, an affront to humanity.

And so, that is that when it comes to democracies. Von Wright accuses us human beings of perpetrating the worst of crimes, hubris. It is to our overweening pride we should look for the reason Paradise has been lost, that Pandora has released suffering into the world, that we have sold our souls to the devil. I ask myself whether it is not this exact crime he commits in his role as interpreter of an age. He steps forward as a judge, rebuking society and the people, and he visits his punishment on an entire civilization. Personally, I don’t like it one bit.

The memoirs continue to trouble me. It is only after a great deal of soul-searching that I understand that my unease is due to identification: Perhaps I could have written the lines that cause the hairs on my forearms to rise. Perhaps I carry within me the feelings von Wright expresses there.

Keeping the personal and the political apart

Von Wright troubles me precisely because he reflects traits I do not like in myself. As a historian and scholar, I am well acquainted with the earth’s recurring disasters and the rise and fall of civilizations. I thus find it genuinely difficult to get worked up over the idea that the story of Europe will come to an end, or that future generations will regard our struggles and our doings with the benevolent understanding of the anthropologist. This is, I say coolly, part and parcel of history.

Likewise, I can feel alienated to the point of despair in the popular culture as it is manifested in newspapers, on the net, and on television. Sometimes the inner exile seems the only life choice worth making. It would be foolish to not take seriously the Ibsen who held the minority was almost always right, or to not be attracted to the Strindberg who believed that true quality of life can only be attained in the small, in the company of those who have turned their backs on the masses, materialism, and mammon.

It further seems to me that Humanity (or at least a surprisingly large number of people) is not capable of doing everything we can imagine and visualize. This has had appalling consequences during periods of our history. Those who have, like me, read about these consequences, and those who have seen them with their own eyes, are struck dumb. Grief, despair, wonder; perhaps the most deeply painful is the empathy with the fate of the humiliated, and the hateful amazement over the degenerate perversity of the executioners. In the best of what fiction writers have written about us, we are capable of doing things that we do not believe Humanity is capable of. In reality, rooms of possibility are
opened to evil, rooms whose doors a living God should have closed. This is another reason optimism is for me an impossible worldview.

Cool distance, alienation, and melancholy in the mundanity of the present are certainly feelings I share with many people in the world of culture and scholarship.

I have been moved by von Wright since the age of seventeen. Perhaps his appeal has been precisely that he made philosophy out of my sense of distance, melancholy, and alienation. But the passion in my reading of him comes from the antagonism, from my refusal to make politics out of the distance, the melancholy, and the alienation. It is against this backdrop I believe his politics, his criticism of civilization can on one level be met only with personal attack and self-examination, and the passion of my involvement likely stems from my positive experiences of folk high school, amateur sports, and voluntary associations. In light of these experiences, von Wright’s pessimism seems, in no small measure, to be an expression of a personality trait, an elitist haphaphobia, and a muddled philosophy of history. For these reasons, he sees only decline and threat where “the people” see progress and opportunities: the growing political influence and the radical democratizing effects of technology, science, and economic growth.

_The forces to which von Wright is relatively indifferent (the victory of democracy) or those that make him apocalyptically agitated (technology and economic growth) are precisely the forces that have transformed the people from underclass to citizens of the welfare state._

I find it hard to accept the lukewarm interest and relative indifference of critics of civilization in the face of the most powerful result of cultural modernization: the expansion of human scope for action and discussion that democracy brings. And it is hard to understand the fury and the one-sidedness in his criticism of economic and technical/scientific modernization. Personally, I cannot but see this modernization as the best example of how – despite everything – it may be wise to believe in modernity, reason, and progress.

Certainly, pessimism is undeniably a highly understandable and respectable worldview, but humanism, on the other hand, need not be either optimistic or pessimistic.