

OPF-24-43

Oct. 25, 1975 - LA

The Dissolution Of Tomorrow

By LEWIS MUMFORD

MUCH OF THE work in a civilized community rests upon the assumption that the show is good for a long run. The drama of the present tends to move in a given direction only when it receives the double impact of the past and the future; and if the past be too frightful for remembrance or the future too cloudy for anticipation, the present ceases to move in any particular direction, and teeters fitfully about from point to point.

Almost any country that has acutely felt the effects of the war would furnish instances of the empty inconsecutiveness of a present that is divorced from a past and a future.

Trustworthy observers who have been abroad during the last two years bring back disheartening reports to the effect that science, art and scholarship among the younger generation have been steadily on the wane. Perhaps a little too much has been made of the fact that in many parts of Europe artists and students are literally starving; and it is possible that we have not taken sufficiently into account the condition of uncertainty which is making the younger generation turn aside from work the benefits of which may not be immediately realized in order to spend their energies on trifles that promise a speedy return — even if it be only a day's respite from hunger or a night of forgetfulness.

EAT, DRINK, and be merry, for tomorrow we die, is what the last seven years of "preserving civilization" has written on the wall. Doubtless Mr. Bernard Shaw's "Back to Methuselah" owes something to his observations of the attitude of his contemporaries toward wars and rumors of wars.

Human life, says Mr. Shaw, must be vastly lengthened before people will have the grace to take it seriously.

In that century of fitful peace which followed the Napoleonic Wars the expectation of life for a healthy European male was small enough in all conscience; but today the expectation is so precarious, with armaments piling up and diplomacy festering and home-guards drilling and privilege-hunting rampant, that one cannot even count upon continuity in the life of any particular community, to say nothing of any particular individual. As a result, all work that depends for its sustenance upon a heritage from the past, and is lured forward, through swamp and thicket and jungle, by the gleam of the future, is failing and dying.

The day that does not carry the seed of tomorrow in its womb is sterile and fit only for eating and drinking; the measured, disciplined, purposeful life depends upon the promise of continuity. Is it any wonder then, that the holocaust in Europe has not merely decreased the amount of arable ground under cultivation but has also, for similar reasons, diminished the area of cultured and civilized life?

Art, literature, and science are almost meaningless if their development promises to cease with the life of the particular persons for whom they have a meaning. If there is to be no future there can be no way of differentiating between one kind of activity and another — for the ultimate basis of differentiation must rest upon the capacity for producing a "life more abundant" — and one might equally well, on Bentham's advice, play pushpins instead of writing poetry.

Those of the older generation who have survived the years of the war and the peace will carry on their work, out of habit, as the bees build their honeycombs with no thought for the bee-keeper who will some day pillage their communities; but the younger people whose habits of work have been disrupted by war, who have never tasted the life of plain living and high thinking, who have never given themselves up to any consecutive purpose except that of "defending their country" — what can one expect of these young people except that they will seek out whatever directly promises to give them enjoyment and satisfaction?

DOES NOT this account a little for the lassitude, the febrility, the spurious gaiety that a good many competent observers have noted in Europe today? What we call the future is in a sense always an illusion, and the greatest disillusion that Europe possibly suffers from is the loss of something that never existed outside the minds of those who moulded their activities in terms of it — the loss of a tomorrow.

Statesmen who talk in a loud, guilty way about preserving the fabric of civilization might pause long enough in their clamor to realize that they are talking about something that actually exists. Civilization is the magic instrument by which men live in a world of time that has three dimensions: The past, the present, and the future. When neither security of life nor continuity of works is maintained, civilization must necessarily collapse. It has done so before; and it has taken hundreds of years to weave a new fabric; and it may do so again. A pretty prospect for the encouragement and discipline of adolescents!

(This article, excerpted from the book, "Findings and Keepings: Analects for an Autobiography," was first published in 1921. The writer, who was 80 Oct. 19, has written pioneering works on the architecture and life of America's cities.)

The New York Times Special Features