

SECTION IV

THE PATHOLOGY OF  
CIVILIZATION



*Set down there not knowing it was Seattle, I could not have told where I was. Everywhere frantic growth, a carcinomatous growth. Bulldozers rolled up the green forests and heaped the resulting trash for burning. The torn white lumber from concrete forms was piled beside gray walls. I wonder why progress looks so much like destruction.*

—John Steinbeck (1962)

**T**his section cannot be cleanly separated from the preceding one. The distinction, such as it is, is one of emphasis. From pictures that help to reveal basic qualities of civilization, we shift in the direction of focusing on civilization's dynamics and what they portend, now and in the future. Fully established, mature civilization is what has to be grasped, in its malignant and metastasizing trajectory.

There is little doubt what is in store: a steadily bleaker and more debased reality, with civilization's ideological defenses eroding to naught. Of course, there have always been some who could see through the massive fraud. Consider William Morris, writing in 1885, a banner year for ascendant industrial capitalism:

I have no more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future of "civilisation," which I know now is doomed to destruction, and probably before very long; what a joy it is to think of! and how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies.... I used really to despair because I thought what the idiots of our day call progress would go on perfecting itself: happily I know that all will have a sudden check.

He was overly optimistic about the imminence of civilization's downfall, but the ranks of its critics, if this collection is any gauge at all, have certainly swelled since Morris registered his judgment.

Even some of the high priests of civilization have abandoned earlier enthusiasm or faith in its latest triumphs. In the contemporary era of high-tech mania and belief in the transcendent contributions of instantaneous computerized interaction, critics are beginning to multiply. By the mid-1970s even Marshall McLuhan came to some very uncelebratory conclusions. For example:

Electronic media reduce personal identity to vestigial levels that, in turn, diminish moral feeling to practically nothing.

Other critics have recognized that postmodernism, far and away the reigning cultural zeitgeist, plays an essential and duplicitous role in the defense of civilization. Qualities like cynicism, relativism, and superficiality are part of this, but the postmodern gloss on society goes even further in its efforts to deflect opposition to civilized social existence. Frederic Jameson captures this aptly when he asks

How it is possible for the most standardized and uniform social reality in history, by the merest ideological flick of the thumbnail, the most imperceptible of displacements, to reemerge as the rich oil-smear sheen of absolute diversity and the unimaginable and unclassifiable forms of human freedom.

Postmodernism seems to go beyond mere denial, to actually affirm our ghastly present. Aversion to analysis, a key postmodern trait, can and does obscure that which needs to be seen for what it is, and confronted.