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MODERNISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS NEAR THE MILLENNIUM

As we lurch toward the end of the twentieth century, it is easy to think that our public discourse has gone through a core meltdown. The cold war is over, and we are free from the fear that our leaders will blow up the world. But we are menaced by a whole new world of pretexts for people to kill each other. Ethnicity, religion, nationalism, all old and venerable forces in politics, are erupting today with new brutal fervor against all those defined as "other." Wilsonian "self-determination of peoples," a vision so dear to liberals of the early twentieth century, now looks like little more than a preface to Milosevician "ethnic cleansing," a pretext for destroying the peoples next door.

Demagogic chauvinism is thriving all over—in Eastern Europe, in Central Africa, in India, in the Middle East, in our own ghettos and universities, inside Washington's Beltway—who knows where the next flash point will be? What today's demagogues have in common is the power to persuade masses of people that they have nothing in common with each other, and to arouse them to treat their chosen others as nothing. The burning question for our *fin de siècle* turns out to be the desperate appeal Rodney King made during the 1992 Los Angeles riots: "Can't we all get along?"

I believe we can get along, maybe even more, if we get a grasp on some of the big ideas that are floating in our cultural atmosphere, ideas that have the power to bring people together across national and ethnic and class and sexual borderlines. We have a form of liberalism that, far from being innocent and naive, has seen and been through everything. We have a mode of modernism that not only explores our own subjectivity, but empathizes with other people's. We have an idea of human rights that judges and condemns past and present history, but that sees this bad history not as a refutation of the idea of human rights but as its foundation, its basic reason for being. Men and women of the late twentieth century inherit all these ideas; we have to find ways to make them our own.

The idea of human rights has a fascinating history: it has come and gone and come again. Two centuries ago, in the 1790s and 1800s, it was central to European and American political discourse. One century ago, in the 1890s and 1900s, it had become so marginal it nearly disappeared. Now, at the end of the twentieth century, it has come back, full of new life. I want to tell this dramatic story here. It is a story that democratic socialists should want to hear.

All these ideas go back to the age of the American and French Revolutions. For a couple of centuries, they have been colliding with the way things are. But these collisions of ideas and history, when they haven't killed the ideas, have made them stronger, better fit to live in history. Just five years ago these ideas came together and moved millions of people all around the world to put their lives on the line, and millions more to identify with them. Their fusion made 1989 one of the thrilling years in all human history; in a century so rich in horror, it felt like a glorious climax, a grace note. The thrill may be hard to recapture now—how many massacres later?—and yet, not only was it real, but *we were there*. The hopes of 1989 will be harder to fulfill than the activists of that year believed. Yet those hopes refuse to die, and even their failures turn out to make them strong. My

story could be framed around the question: *How was 1989 possible?*

Some political thinkers today think that questions like this, and stories like the one I want to tell, are illegitimate and self-delusory. The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard argues, in his book *The Post-Modern Condition*, that all of what he calls *grandes histoires*, or larger stories of a people, are groundless. The hallmark of postmodern thought, Lyotard says, is "incredulity toward metanarrative."[1] But if postmoderns want to justify this incredulity (and not just assert it), they are logically forced to fold it into a metanarrative of their own. In fact, their own *grande histoire* turns out to be quite like the "End of Ideology" narrative of a generation ago. (Both portray the destruction of Marxism as the central event in modern history.)

My feeling is that talk about politics and culture would be a lot clearer if all the talkers would admit that they are telling *grandes histoires*, and try to recognize honestly what their stories are. (Some of us might be telling contradictory stories, but we need to recognize this, too.) Then we could compare these competing stories, see what they put in and what they leave out, and judge what impact they might have on how we want to live.

1789: The Great Modernist Event

I believe that the French Revolution, and especially the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, is the basic modernist event. It brings together some crucial modern ideas and transforms them into social practice: (1)*Natural Rights*, which are itemized in the U.S. Bill of Rights and in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. People of the 1790s understood this to mean a belief that every human being was entitled to protection of life, liberty, and property, but also entitled to the new, ambiguous but alluring "pursuit of happiness." The rights featured in 1789 included freedom of speech and communication, and due process of law. Some of these modes of freedom were "negative," protecting people against incursions by their governments; others were "positive," giving the people the right to participate in politics and government.

(2) The *Social Contract* was a foundational act in which modern men and women would come together to create a new community, to establish a public sector, to transform themselves from isolated individuals into citizens who need one another. Finally, (3) *Authenticity* was the idea that a social contract, or indeed any human action, is valid only if we do it freely; we can be bound only by laws and social institutions that are *our own*, freely created by us, not imposed on us against our will.[2]

These ideas of human rights are crystallized in the American Bill of Rights and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Both documents date from 1789; Thomas Jefferson, in Paris as the first American Ambassador to France, played an important role in the creation of both. The documents were meant to put "the natural, sacred and inalienable rights of man" permanently on the map of modern politics. And they certainly did. But the rights they promoted turned out to be deeply problematical. It took the whole nineteenth century to unravel their ambiguities and inner contradictions.

Nineteenth-century culture developed an amazing variety of critiques of the rights of 1789. Virtually all intellectuals of note, people with the most disparate beliefs, joined in this polemic: Edmund Burke, Jeremy Bentham, Robert Southey, Samuel Coleridge, William Cobbett, Adam Mueller, the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, Fichte, Thomas Carlyle, Saint-Simon, Proudhon, Fourier, Auguste Comte, Russia's Slavophiles, Hegel and Marx, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand Toennies, Georges Sorel, Max Nordau, Maurice Barrès, and many more, all honed their minds by assaulting this idea. It almost seemed as if no intellectual could develop his own ideas without first ripping the Rights of Man to shreds. Nietzsche, writing in the 1880s, described the nineteenth century as a century of "revolution against the Revolution." By 1889, the French Revolution's centenary, it was hard to find anyone eminent in Europe or North America who was willing to stand up for its basic ideas.[3]

The 1790s: The First Postmoderns

Here are some of the main nineteenth-century objections to the Rights of Man. Objections 1 and 2 come mainly from the 1790s and 1800s, years when the revolution was fresh, vibrant, and open-ended.

1. The Declaration generation imagined that rights are "natural," as if they were eternal primal forces like the earth, the sky, the sun. But in fact they are only contingencies, historical accidents, of this time, of that place. Take these documents out of Western Europe or North America, or out of the eighteenth century, and no one will have any idea what they mean. The claim of a cosmic foundation is delusory; these rights, and the human relationships they presuppose, are provincial, not universal. Other societies live in other ways; why should they change to this way?

2. The supposed subject of these rights is impossibly abstract. There is no such person as "man" in the real world. Joseph de Maistre says that if he looks around for "man," he can't find him; all he can see are Englishmen, Frenchmen, Russians, and so on. The category "man" is empty of meaning: real life can be lived only within a particular *community*. What is a community? A human association where people are bound to each other biologically, organically, by prerational emotions. Each people has its own history and its own unfolding inner life. Emphasis on individual rights, and pressure to fulfill individual needs, destroys the primal bonds of community, and makes us disembodied creatures who only know how to reason—to appraise and calculate our self-interest—and have forgotten how to feel.

These 1790s critiques are often epistemological in form, but political in substance and force. Long before Derrida, they were doing a form of deconstruction. The first critique deconstructs the idea of "nature," the second does the same for "man." The desire to take modern ideas apart, in a way that will reveal their bad faith and inner bankruptcy, is one of the marks of the cultural enterprise that we now call postmodernism.

The first great surge of postmodern energy came at a moment that marked both the heyday of Romanticism, and the dawn of the European right wing. The first postmodern intellectuals turned all their scorn, wit, and rage against such 1790s revolutionary myths as human unity, autonomy, equality. Did they find nothing problematical in the 1790s reactionary myths of traditional "community," which celebrated kingdoms where every person supposedly had a secure place, and where gracious ruling classes treated their subjects like family? It's hard to believe. Read a writer like Coleridge, say, or Schelling, and you find a power of spirit that can see into and see through everything. But look at their political lives, and you see how they truncated themselves more effectively than any guillotine could have done.[4]

The selective blindness of deconstruction in its youth helped to protect landlords and bosses, dukes and kings against the pressures of the people they were crushing. Postmoderns of today, so vigilant about everyone else's genealogies, tend to be coy about their own. Isn't it time they had the guts to look their ancestors in the face? I don't think their genealogy invalidates their work. But it does give them a lot of explaining to do.

Rights and Wrongs in the Nineteenth Century

3. Here is Karl Marx in the 1840s, in his essay "On the Jewish Question." He is arguing that the Rights of Man offers modern men and women too little: "Let us notice first of all that the so-called rights of man, as distinct from the rights of the citizen, are simply the rights of a member of civil society, that is, of egoistic man separated from other men and from the community....withdrawn into himself, wholly preoccupied with his private interest, and acting in accord with his private caprice." The rights of man fit men for life in a brutal society without any sense of community or citizenship. The Declaration is like a diploma that certifies fitness to serve in a war of each against all.

4. Here is Dostoevsky, in his "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," folded into *The Brothers Karamazov* and published in 1881 just after his death: "You are going into the world with some promise of freedom which men, in their simplicity and their unruliness, cannot even understand, and which they fear and dread—since nothing has ever been more unsupportable for a man and a human society than freedom.....Now, today, people are persuaded that they are freer than ever, yet they have brought their freedom to us and humbly laid it at our feet....They will wail to us: we are coming back to you, save us from ourselves!" If Marx protests that the Rights of Man give us too little, Dostoevsky's Inquisitor complains they are too much.

Marx is writing in the 1840s, after the rights of 1789 have had a couple of generations to unfold. Half a century after the Bastille, wealth and capital are expanding at a spectacular pace, overwhelming everybody who has no capital, and threatening to reduce the rights of man to a travesty. Marx urges workers to organize against modern bourgeois society, but he attacks that society from a modern point of view. He imagines the rights of man in a more complex and deeper way than anybody imagined them before. His idea is not to abolish modern values, but to fulfill them. He agrees with Hegel's dictum, "The principle of the modern world is freedom of subjectivity." The capitalist economy nourishes that freedom, but then destroys it—not only for the workers, but even for the bourgeoisie (whom Marx describes as "comfortable in their alienation"). Marx dreams of communism as a society where people can fulfill themselves as both men and citizens, and where "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

With the Grand Inquisitor, we are getting close to the end of the century. Revolutions have started, and mobilized great popular support, but have everywhere met defeat. Still, European and American workers have learned how to organize, and a mass labor movement has come into being. But militant chauvinism and xenophobia are growing in waves; some people fear, and others hope, that the waves will sweep everything else away. Now all the great nations of Europe (plus Japan; the United States will take a little longer) have mass armies manned by the draft, and huge stocks of heavy artillery, conceived by modern scientists and built by the modern working class. Europe has been at peace for decades, but the trip that will lead to August 1914 is well under way.

Marx, a modernist socialist, believed that modern men and women, living lives that were partly free and partly repressed, wanted deep down to be completely free. (Thus the workers' desire for freedom would drive them to revolt against a repressive society and state.) Dostoevsky's Inquisitor makes a radically opposite argument: what these divided selves really crave is to be completely repressed. This character is postmodern in a stronger sense than those of critiques 1 and 2. He doesn't share their doubts that human rights are coherent or meaningful. He even thinks that deep down they are correct. But he believes modern times are tragic: modern freedom and subjectivity are psychologically unbearable for most of the people they were meant for. It's bearable for *him*, he thinks, *he* can take it; but he is convinced that *they* can't. So he tries to construct new forms of life for them, life forms that will make them happy by preventing them from developing, by protecting them from themselves. These forms make up the Inquisitorial trinity of "miracle, mystery and authority." (The Inquisitor's trinitarian form could also be a parody of the French revolutionary—and modernist—trinity of "liberty, equality, fraternity.") The masses are modern, just as Marx said they were, so they won't feel at home with prerevolutionary traditions or feudal hierarchies: they will need new ones. Dostoevsky underlines the artificially constructed character of these new norms and the profound contempt for people that underlies them. The Grand Inquisitor proclaims a radically modern vision of the right, liberated from all feudal and traditional loyalties, disenchanted in its vision of life, determined to rule the world by mind control. Maybe we should call it a modernism of lies.

Did Dostoevsky himself share this vision? I doubt it. Remember, he defines his Inquisitor as the mortal enemy of Jesus Christ, and never, not even in his most transgressive moments, was Dostoevsky ready to curse Jesus Christ. But he was an exemplary modern intellectual, determined, as Nietzsche put it, to "live dangerously," to flirt with every idea that terrified him, to build his house under the volcano.

The 1890s: The Disappearance of Rights

"This was a post-revolutionary conservatism," wrote Thomas Mann, "a revolt against liberal standards not from the rear but from the front, not from the old but from the new."[5] The Grand Inquisitor may be the first spokesman of the "conservative revolution." A generation and a war later, this movement recruited Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Ezra Pound, Céline, and made fascism intellectually chic. But a surprisingly similar perspective can be found on the left of the 1890s, in the enormously influential thought of Georges Sorel. For a de-

cade or more, Sorel expounded an intensely dramatic form of Marxism, which he called "social poetry." He believed, like the Inquisitor, that the basis of political life was myth. In his Marxist phase, his organizing myth was the general strike: this idea, he said, would fill the masses with religious zeal (Sorel romanticized the Crusades) and make them explode like a bomb. But the bomb failed to go off; Sorel gradually lost faith in the working classes, and embraced *la nation*, the belligerent and xenophobic modern nation-state, as his ideal revolutionary subject. He became Mussolini's spiritual guru, and led a whole generation of radicals from socialism to fascism.[6]

Both the left and the right of the 1890s polarized political life into masses and elites: the avant-garde elites create myths, the masses either reject them or act them out. If the masses are happy with the myths of the postmodern right, they will go down on their knees; if they are happy with the myths of the postmodern left, they will go out in the streets. Around the turn of the century, France's anti-Dreyfusard mobs introduced an ominous new synthesis: people going out in the streets to fight for the right to go down on their knees.

If we compare the political culture of the 1890s with that of the 1790s, we find that the vision of the people seizing power and proclaiming its rights has virtually faded away. In the 1890s images of people are deterministic to the point of fatalism. In bourgeois democracies, we find competing visions of people as products of their social status, or of their religion, or of their ethnicity, or of their nationality. Now, too, for the first time, there are mass movements that reduce people to products of race. Marxism in the 1890s has devolved into images of people who are pure products of their class, and who tread a conveyor belt to a revolution that is historically inevitable. (Lenin and Rosa Luxemberg, opponents in so many ways, were allies in the attempt to rescue Marxism from fatalism and keep the idea of subjective freedom and agency alive.) If we look at the culture of *fin-de-siecle* physical science—remember, this is before Einstein and Heisenberg—we find a metaphysics of total fatalism, with individuals helpless before inexorable cosmic laws. If we look at emerging social science, we find a composite image: people may be products of this force or of that one, or of many forces at a time, but *products* is what they are.[7]

Given the profound passivity in all these images of modern man, it shouldn't be surprising that the idea of human rights all but disappeared. There was no place on this political spectrum for a vision of people as free subjects who are ready to fight for their rights, who come together and make a social contract to create a community, and who see politics as an arena for human beings to become who they are. At the end of the nineteenth century, there is a great abundance of visions of modern people as objects—objects of the state, of the world economy, of their class, of their ethnicity or race. There's hardly anyone around who tries to imagine these men and women as subjects.

And yet, while the ideas of human autonomy and human rights were losing resonance at the center of the Western world, people at the margins of modern society were learning to embrace them. Wherever marginal people awakened and aroused themselves—in subjugated nations (think of India, of China) or peoples deprived of nationality (Serbs, Croats, Arabs, Jews), in enslaved or dominated races (the African National Congress, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), in the dominated but increasingly assertive female sex, in the labor unions of the exploited and oppressed working class—the idea of human rights was crucial to their collective self-awareness and to the demands they made on the world. Even as the rights of man were being rejected as a *passé* embarrassment in the West, they were becoming a beacon to the future for insulted and injured people around the world.

(Nevertheless, in all marginal movements, cosmopolitan identities and demands for recognition of human rights have had to fight against aggressive denials of shared humanity and strident contempt for the rights of all outsiders. The women's movement, the labor movement, the black movement, all have suffered when they have isolated themselves, all have thrived when they have brought it home to other people that their fight is everybody's fight.

The Russian Revolution is tragic in the way it at once embraced and expanded human rights, then denied and destroyed them.[8] The inner contradic-

tions of Russia in 1905 and 1917 have exploded in dozens of revolutions and new regimes, all through the twentieth century, all around the world. They have never been overcome.)

The Twentieth Century: Escape from Escapes from Freedom

The early twentieth century, the golden age of modernism, was one of the most explosively creative periods in history. In science, in literature, drama, painting, music, architecture, not only did the old genres thrive extravagantly, but new cultural forms were invented and flourished—cinema, psychoanalysis, electronics, jazz, genetics, modern dance. But the tremendous surges of human energy and imagination that marked the culture of those years weren't working in politics. In Russia, they worked erratically: a revolutionary era that began with the creation of *soviets*, an authentically new democratic form, ended with their conversion into bureaucratic machines—"transmission belts," as Stalin said—for the burial of democracy. In Western Europe, they worked negatively. Europe's political imagination in the modernist age created two monstrous new political forms: the world war and the fascist movement.

The first striking thing about World War I was what Freud, writing early in 1915, called "the mobilization of the mind."[9] Millions of people, including people who had been working for universal goals, demonized each other overnight. The next striking thing is that, although generals, politicians and millions of citizens knew as early as September 1914 that the armies were evenly matched and the war as it was could not be won—it was only the entrance of the United States that tipped the balance—they kept on sacrificing their sons and themselves, two million, five million, ten million, more.

Fascist movements sprang into being virtually overnight at the war's end. They picked up explosive strength and momentum, mobilized millions of followers, overwhelmed liberal republics, smashed everything in their path, and performed horrifying demonstrations of "total power." (The word "totalitarian," a form of abuse after the military defeat of fascism, was a badge of honor for fascism in its prime.) Fascists flaunted their brutality theatrically, to show that they felt no common humanity with their victims, that they had the strength (so they called it) to triumph over conscience, and to stomp out the sentimental feeling that all people matter and all deserve respect and care.

Fascism pushed forward in what seemed an inexorable march. To many people, it looked like "the wave of the future" (Anne Lindbergh on Nazi Germany), destined to conquer and rule the world. A striking aspect of fascist triumphalism was its reserve army of fellow travelers—often the most educated and cultured people—who only yesterday were democratic citizens, but who today, just like the Inquisitor's clientele, were thrilled to be relieved of their burden of freedom ("the great anxiety and terrible agony they now endure") and told what to do. Some of these born-again fascists were even great modern artists: Emil Nolde, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Céline.

Fascism's eruptive power was a surprise. The next surprise was that fascism didn't conquer the world, after all. It was finally defeated, at a vast human cost, partly by nations that, even where they oppressed their peoples, left them basically free (the United States, the United Kingdom), and partly by nations that, when they enslaved their peoples, betrayed their promise of freedom (USSR). It turned out not only that a collective escape from freedom doesn't make people (or peoples) invulnerable, but that the experience of living through a partial and messy freedom, a freedom oozing with inner contradictions, might make modern men and women even stronger. World War II helped millions of ordinary neurotic non-supermen to believe in themselves.

The Late Twentieth Century: Human Rights Comes Back

After democracy's triumph over the most radical denial of humanity and human rights, the idea of universal rights took on a new force. This idea is crystallized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and again in the Helsinki Charter of 1975. Post-World War II ideas of human rights have inspired an amazing variety of political initiatives, from the popular civil rights movement and the great decisions of the Warren Court in the United States to such opposition movements in Eastern Europe as Charter 77, KOR, Solidarity,

the Civic Forum, and militant democratic movements throughout the Soviet bloc, to years of anti-military resistance all over Latin America, to the great demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989. Martin Luther King, Jr., Martin Buber, Nelson Mandela, Andrei Sakharov, Fang Lizhi, Vaclav Havel, have all made their marks in this struggle. That Mandela, who is both a liberal and a Communist, should take power peacefully in a South Africa that is both multiracial and democratic—even a decade ago, who would have dreamt it?—is a thrilling victory, not just for blacks, and not just for South Africans, but for people. The thrill felt around the world shows the desire of late-twentieth-century people to identify with each other, to conceive themselves as part of something bigger, to demand that they should all be recognized as human beings.

It was uncanny that what may have been our century's greatest victories for human rights came in the revolution's bicentennial year, 1989. Ironically, the political culture of East European dissidence, so often penetrating and profound, on this occasion was out to lunch. Vaclav Havel, for instance (but many others as well), has often said: Who, us? Why call *us* revolutionary? Can't you see that we're *against* revolutions, we think Prometheus was a villain, we only favor modesty, we just want to let things *be*? Maybe Havel wanted to illustrate Nietzsche's idea of "creative forgetting," or maybe to show us his mastery as an ironist as well as a revolutionary. Maybe the force of his image, "Velvet Revolution," is to incorporate self-irony into revolutionary life. If so, it is a noble *fin de siècle* bequest to revolutionaries to come.

Today's idea of human rights is clearly modeled on the idea chartered by Lafayette and Jefferson two hundred years ago. But there are important differences.

First of all, contemporary thinkers have assimilated Marx's critique of "modern bourgeois society" (Critique #3). It is now pretty well understood (it was incorporated into the UDHR) that economic survival is as basic a right as there can be. But that right cannot be secured where men and women are locked in an economic war of each against all. So the state must free its citizens from fear of starvation or violent death, and work actively to ensure their survival. If a state doesn't take care of its people's material needs, it loses legitimacy. Enemies of the Communist states in the 1980s would have been surprised to learn—a few, but it seems only a few, got it, and got the joke—that one of their strongest critiques was Marxist in inspiration.

Next, eighteenth-century revolutionaries rooted their rights in a Newtonesque idea of eternal nature. Critics immediately asked, So how come these eternal rights never got proclaimed until right here and right now (Critique #1)? People who talk about rights today have no faith in eternal nature. Their idea of rights is rooted in *history*, in concrete historical experiences shared by people and peoples all over the world. These include

1. the long-term development of the world market, of what Adam Smith and Hegel called "civil society," in which commodities and money form a language that enables—but also forces—people all over the world to talk;

2. an increasingly free flow of peoples, which enables—but also, sometimes, forces—a very large proportion of people in the world to migrate, and sometimes to keep moving;

3. the development of a world culture, arising out of the world market just as Marx (in the *Manifesto*) said it would, integrated through networks of global mass media and information technology;

4. a dreadful but remarkably successful fight against fascism, that is, against the most virulent racist denials of human identity and assaults on human rights;

5. the universal menace of nuclear weapons and nuclear war, and the spontaneous emergence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) around the world, to campaign for nuclear disarmament and peace;

6. an integrated, fully global environment, subject to imbalances and possible global catastrophes, and an international campaign, led by NGOs but often incorporated into state agendas, against environmental deterioration and disaster;

7. an open sexual environment where, increasingly, any man or woman can form sexual bonds with any other, leading to children and new families, but also to infection and death; under the pressures of this environment, a global norm of "reproductive rights" comes into being and makes sense.

All through the nineteenth century, critics of 1789 argued that the idea of humanity was abstract and "artificial," while ethnic and national and sexual identities were immediate and "natural" (Critique #2). If there is one thing we have learned in the twentieth century, it is that these particularist identities are just as artificial, as arbitrary, as elaborately constructed, as the universalist identity of "man." One of the best recent books about modern nationalism is by Benedict Anderson, a student of East Asia, and we can learn a lot from his title alone: *Imagined Communities*.[10] We seem to understand, a lot better than we did, that our particularistic identities grow not from blood and soil or DNA or any other inexorable "bedrock" reality, but from human imagination, from people's minds, whose operations are universal and can be critically scrutinized and shared. Once we get this, we have come a long way toward an identity that is inclusively human.

I've been arguing that human rights is the fundamental modernist idea, and that in recent history it has been deepened and renewed. After the horrors of two world wars and a cold war, Europe and North America have had a chance to feel what peace and prosperity could be like. Through mass media, ordinary people have seen and heard more than ever before of how other people live; they have seen other people's faces up close, and seen their suffering. It has become harder than ever to believe in the mutual impermeability and isolation of people who come from different places, or speak different tongues, or have different skins. Just as ideas like "world literature" and "world music" have become matter-of-fact realities today, it now makes sense to talk about a world "public opinion," even though this opinion rarely has the power to make the world stop, or make it turn in a new way. Jürgen Habermas, the most serious theorist of human rights today, argues that the philosophical basis for human rights is "intersubjective communication." Our mass media convey stereotyped and twisted perceptions, and yet, for all that, still make it possible for real intersubjective communication to go on.

In the last part of our century, Habermas and other supporters of human rights have their most serious arguments with what we might call the postmodern left. These people are supporters of "identity politics," and of "new social movements"—black, women's, gay, environmental, and so on—that have mostly developed since the 1960s. To the extent this group has had a theoretical leader, it was Michel Foucault. Foucault raged with ferocious contempt against liberal politics and ideas—he often sounded a lot like Sorel—against the Enlightenment, the idea of humanity, and all modern thought and culture, which he reduced to just a bunch of "mechanisms of social control." Foucault and his followers and foreign legions disparage all the so-called "normal" people outside their chosen groups for our hopeless otherness. Still, they keep demanding empathy, and recognition, and *rights,* just as if we belonged together to a humanity that they insist cannot exist. And deep down their demands are right, if only they knew.

Many people, movements, and governments are still trying to smash the rights of man. But it will be harder today than it was two centuries ago, because the idea of human rights today is far more historically grounded and concrete, attuned to experiences that so many people around the world really go through and desires they really feel.

In the 1790s, critics of human rights argued that the subject of these rights was assumed to exist in an eternal realm outside history. By the 1990s, the idea of human rights has been around, and has developed a complex history of its own. Now believers in human rights speak from inside the whale; they engage history from within a history all of us share.

Late twentieth-century ideas of human rights have evolved in a context of desperate world cri-

ses; they constitute a response to these crises, and a hope of a way to work through them. The twentieth century has overflowed with horrors, but at last it has produced millions of people who feel affinity and empathy, and who want to reach each other through the flames. The anthem of America's civil rights movement in the 1960s was a transformed version of an old Protestant hymn: "We Shall Overcome." People who believe in human rights now recognize how much there is to overcome, but also how to say "we."

In Chicago today there is an excellent magazine called the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. It was founded in 1945 by tormented men and women who had worked on the Bomb. On its cover every month, there is an image of a clock, ticking and close to midnight. For years, all through the cold war, for most of my life, that clock read 11:55. In the mid-1980s, in the days of perestroika and the SALT II treaty, the editors tentatively set the clock back to 11:50. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, they set it back a little more; it's way back at 11:43 today, an amazing advance. This is the historical context that drives the idea of human rights at the end of the twentieth century: a shared awareness that we're all in it together, that we're living close to midnight, and that human actions can make a difference and give us all more time. □

Notes

[1] *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1979, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Introduction by F.W. Jameson (Minnesota, 1984). Alas, Lyotard's elegant *"grande histoire"* is rendered klunkily as "metanarrative."

[2] This idea of authenticity implies an antithesis, *alienation*, a situation where people appear to be acting freely, but in fact are not. Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* explored the ways in which people could "alienate" their natural rights, that is, consciously or unconsciously give them away: "They ran headlong to their chains, thinking thereby to preserve their liberty." Jefferson and Madison understood this chronic danger, and tried to combat it by conceptualizing rights that would be "inalienable." Marx (along with many other nineteenth-century thinkers, including the great Romantic poets) argued that, even in liberal states where basic human rights were recognized, self-alienation was built into the deeper structures of work, economic exchange, and everyday life. But the alienation was not total: modern men and women could still recognize what was happening to them and fight to overcome it.

[3] The Dreyfus Affair, only a few years later, would bring out the revolutionary principles again. Jean Jaurès played a central role in making clear the connection between the 1789 revolution, the rights of citizenship in 19th-century bourgeois democracy, and the fight for a socialist future. But the Dreyfus Affair also brought out the explosive power of racist mass politics and its capacity to wreck democracy.

[4] Think of Blake, of Shelley, of Buechner, of Stendhal, and it is obvious that I have badly oversimplified Romanticism here. But the radical promise of Romanticism has erupted only at intervals—the 1840s, the 1890s, the 1910s, the 1960s. More often, Romantic insight and imagination have been conscripted into a longstanding *Kulturkampf* against the rights of man.

[5] Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 1947, translated by Harriet Lowe-Porter, 1949 (Penguin, 1968), pp. 352-3. For a few years, during World War I, Mann identified himself with this "conservative revolution." (See especially his wartime *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man.*) After Mann had extracted himself from its grip, he wrote about it brilliantly in *The Magic Mountain* and *Doctor Faustus*.

[6] On this transition, see Zeev Sternhill's excellent study, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (Princeton, 1995).

[7] Here is Max Weber in 1905, at the end of his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, lighting into the people of his time: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart, a nonentity caught in the delusion that it has reached a level of development never before achieved by mankind."

[8] Dostoevsky's writings were banned in Stalin's USSR, but he was venerated as a classic after Stalin's death. Then critics were allowed to point out that, from a Soviet perspective, the Grand Inquisitor's prophecy can be read as a premature manifesto for Leninism.

[9] Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," reprinted in *Collected Papers*, Vol. 4 (Basic Books, 1959), pp. 288-317. This sad but marvelous essay predicts that the war will end only in a way that will generate an even greater, more lethal war.

[10] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1983).

[11] See especially, Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 1985, translated by Frederick Lawrence (MIT, 1987).