
After the Age of Exuberance

Contributed by Peter Goodchild
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Is there a correlation between the human psyche mood, world view and material resources? Or, more specifically, is there a correlation between the psyche and a relative change in resources, i.e. within one culture, from an earlier decade or century to a later one? Is there a sort of psychological history that parallels the material one? And can we see that correlation in these early years of the 21st century?

The Middle Ages have always struck me as a time of darkness. I imagine hooded monks walking silently through the cloisters, their minds on sin and hellfire. After about 1500, all of that changes. Shakespeare's world is mainly filled with light:

"Oh mistress mine, where are you roaming?
O, stay and hear! Your true love's coming,
That can sing both high and low:
Trip no further, pretty sweeting;
Journey's end in lovers meeting,
Every wise man's son doth know."

Shakespeare lived from 1564 to 1616. And, as the schoolhouse rhyme goes, "In 1492 / Columbus sailed the ocean blue." The discovery of the New World solved some major problems of European overpopulation and its converse resource consumption. (Sweeping aside the natives was seen as only a minor problem.) Is it purely chance that the relative joyfulness of Shakespeare and his contemporaries occurred at the same time as the voyages to the New World?

In chapter 2 of "Overshoot," William R. Catton, Jr. says:

"I shall call the centuries that followed the sudden expansion of European man's habitat by voyages of discovery the Age of Exuberance. . . . During that age, man largely forgot that the world (that is, Europe) had once been saturated with population, and that life had been difficult for that reason. Discovery of the New World gave European man a markedly changed relationship to the resource base for civilized life. When Columbus set sail, there were roughly 24 acres of Europe per European. Life was a struggle to make the most of insufficient and unreliable resources. After Columbus stumbled upon the lands of an unsuspected hemisphere, and after monarchs and entrepreneurs began to make those lands available for European settlement and exploitation, a total of 120 acres of land per person was available in the expanded European habitat five times the pre-Columbian figure!"

Are the earlier years of the Renaissance also evidence of that relationship between psyche and material well-being? The Renaissance is commonly regarded as stretching from the 14th to the 16th centuries, therefore beginning before Columbus. Nevertheless, these earlier centuries were themselves very much a time of "discovery," since it was in those days that Europeans were encountering so much of the classical learning that had been lost after the fall of Rome. The Crusades, whatever their destructive effects, also woke up the European psyche, revealing new horizons to the south

and east of monasticEurope.

The explorations, in other words, were as much mental as physical. With regard to the 13th century, R.W. Southern, in the final chapter of his "Making of the Middle Ages," says:

"All these new views of the world raised problems for scholars as well as statesman questions, for instance, about the bounds of the habitable world, or about the right use of force against heretics, schismatics and unbelievers. But if, for the scholar, the problems of the habitable world were growing in size and complexity, he was facing even larger problems as he looked at the physical universe and speculated about its origin and constitution. Students in the Arts Faculty were now learning about the heavens from Ptolemy and his Arab commentators the 'real stuff' at last, undebased by the tradition of the Latins. . . ."

All these thoughts were going through my head a good deal lately. Then one afternoon, following an unusually difficult few hours of college work, here in the Arabia the monks once encountered, I walked into my apartment and casually chose a CD to play. It was a collection of sacred arias and choruses, including the Bach-Gounod "Ave Maria." I have always had a fondness for "monk music," I must admit. Well, yes, Bach (1714-88) and Gounod (1818-1893) are long after the Renaissance, but this piece of music is religious and therefore conservative. The monastic darkness is still there: "Pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death."

So often have I heard such music and felt uplifted. Lest I seem histrionic, however, I should add that I need an unusually bad day to get the full pleasure out of this sort of thing. My point is simply that monk music is the right medicine for a sick mind. The Middle Ages were, I would say, not the best of times in which to be living. In the introduction to his translation of "The History of the Franks" by Bishop Gregory of Tours (c. 539 - 594), Lewis Thorpe tells us that the book "re-echoes with the animal screams of men and women being tortured unto death: yet Gregory never once questions this effective method of exacting confession, implicating confederates, or simply satisfying the blood-lust of Queens and Kings." As often as I find myself swept up into dreams of the monastic world, I am not always sure that I share Norman F. Cantor's judgment, in the final paragraph of his "Civilization of the Middle Ages," that these were "the good and beautiful" centuries.

As the world's material resources go into permanent decline, are we moving from an age of Elvis Presley back to an age of monk music? And will we eventually find, if not a new world of the body, then a new world of the mind?

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