



THE AGE OF
THE CRISIS
OF MAN

THOUGHT AND
FICTION IN AMERICA,
1933-1973

MARK GREIF

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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
PRINCETON AND OXFORD

Copyright © 2015 by Princeton University Press
Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 6 Oxford Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TW

press.princeton.edu

Jacket art © Julie Mehretu, *Looking Back to a Bright New Future*, 2003.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Greif, Mark, 1975–

The age of the crisis of man : thought and fiction in America, 1933–1973 / Mark Greif.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-691-14639-3 (h : alk. paper) 1. American fiction—20th century—History and criticism. I. Title.

PS379.G73 2014

813'.509—dc23

2014007905

A portion of [chapter 4](#) was originally published as “ ‘The Death of the Novel’ and Its Afterlives: Toward a History of the ‘Big Ambitious Novel,’ ” in *boundary 2*, Vol. 36, issue 2, pp. 11–30.

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British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

This book has been composed in ITC Century Std and Futura

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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What purpose is served by delineating the core of the human? Or, in an older nomenclature, the “nature” or “condition of Man”? The project recurs in the history of thought. It is not purely continuous. Against a background murmur that may be ceaseless emerge audible moments of conversation and command.

The moments we know well, for example, of the German Enlightenment before 1800 or Athens in the fourth century BC, may inspire a misconception. They encourage us to suppose that in every moment of intensified inspection of the human, a notable mutation occurs, a collective result or definite disagreement emerges, and the idea of humanity is decisively changed.

On the contrary. The more general recurrence may be of episodes in which the imperative to determine the human creates the meaningful effect. This would constitute a form of interrogative rumination that adopts some habits, but not the essential ones, of investigation from a discipline or a science. It would be the questioning of the human that mattered and not the answers.

An impressive number of books (some famous, many forgotten) that appeared in the United States in the period 1933 to 1973 carried a particular kind of title. One knows immediately the era in which American and transatlantic intellectuals produced works like *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Reinhold Niebuhr), *The Condition of Man* (Lewis Mumford), “The Root is Man” (Dwight Macdonald), *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (Jean-Paul Sartre), *The Human Condition* (Hannah Arendt), and *One-Dimensional Man* (Herbert Marcuse), the same era in which a popular photographic exhibition called *The Family of Man* (Edward Steichen and Carl Sandburg) could bring a quarter million visitors to the Museum of Modern Art in New York before drawing nine million viewers worldwide, and have its title sound not vacuous and naive, as it can today, but stately and exigent.

“The ——— of Man” made a pattern for many of the defining titles of midcentury, not only because of the accident of nomenclature by which “man” stood for “humankind” or “human beings,” but because the key instances identified books that shared a fixed and finite constellation of concerns. Similar titles appeared on the covers of more forgettable but equally revealing volumes presenting comparable worries about the human future: *Man’s Measure* (Erich Kahler), *Modern Man Is Obsolete* (Norman Cousins), *The Science of Man in the World Crisis* (Ralph Linton), *Education for Modern Man* (Sidney Hook), *Human Nature and the Human Condition* (Joseph Wood Krutch), and *Who Is Man?* (Abraham Joshua Heschel).

These publications left behind the old campaigners that one still finds, bent-spined, on used bookstore shelves, their back covers decorated with appraisals—of the loss of “the dignity of man,” of man’s fallen “condition,” of the need to save man from himself—embalmed in a language that often seems incomprehensible. They are the books, too, that were on the basement shelves of my childhood, in twenty-five-cent or fifty-cent reprints, the worthy and earnest paperbacks that my parents’ generation inherited to educate themselves for the responsibilities of their era.

It would be easy to leave the famous books to their individual histories and to ignore the

minor books as period pieces from a period few would trouble to define. Having dug through this material, I will argue that the discourse it reveals from the midcentury age of the “crisis of man” is historically indispensable. I will not, however, be arguing that the discourse was wise, or either good or bad. Exhuming history should not require that we venerate it, only understand its constitution and effects. And the discourse was precisely of that peculiar imperative-interrogative type I believe we may often misunderstand or mischaracterize.

The elements of the discourse at its origin can be connected in a straightforward way. In the United States before 1933, pragmatism and progressivism stood as dominant philosophical legacies. John Dewey stood as a figurehead for both. Opponents of Dewey took energy from the overseas rise of fascism and a perceived need to oppose it with certainty, permanence, and transcendent values. The emigration of refugees from Hitler after 1933 deepened this confluence. The émigrés, too, were desperate to mobilize resistance to Nazism, but they contributed new concerns and unfamiliar philosophical lineages. Perhaps the discourse might not have outlasted Allied victory in the war, but after Hiroshima and the revelations of the Holocaust, the public reach of the discourse expanded and spread, even as its original rationale weakened. The pressure and purported mortal seriousness of the discourse could be felt in areas far exceeding the narrow philosophical worlds of its origin, as it was adopted by entrepreneurs of ideas for their own small worlds. (Most damaging to the discourse’s reputation among intellectuals was its adoption by propagandists for the Cold War, but this can be said to have shaped their further transformations of the discourse, not repelled intellectuals from it.)

From an account of the genesis and early constellations of the discourse—before, during, and in the troubled aftermath of World War II, addressed in early chapters—this study will turn to those surprising transmissions of authority as they affect other intellectual and philosophical positions over the three decades that succeeded the war, or the rest of the period I am identifying as “midcentury,” 1933–73.

But this is not meant to be a story of the persistence, changes, or rise and fall of an idea (say, “the Man idea”). The history that matters is how a particular set of collisions and concentrations—which do not rise to the level of “idea,” which will come to belong to a particular political and intellectual orientations (even those initially outside it), and which seemed to participants simultaneously bound to a tiny moment (anti-Nazism) and eternal (what about humanity?)—alters the obligations of intellect and thus what counts as a serious question and answer.

Here we face the level of a transient or anonymous intensification of one inquiry that exerts gravity upon seemingly unrelated questions across the whole public space of thought. We see effects in many specific locations, but cannot later trace them back to the invisible or extinct object that shifted all the legitimate possibilities and positions. For a long period in the mid-twentieth century, fundamental anthropology—the problematic nature of “man”—became a main rhetorical and contemplative current in the streams of thought and writing that shape a public philosophy. It did so in several countries, by the wartime import and export of ideas and thinkers through the United States entrepôt. Thus, this study is meant both to contribute to the history of a single episode in the restructuring of midcentury thought and to theorize an unseen *kind* of principle of determination of historical thought, the common determinant, here, for ideas that scholars treat superbly but separately.

totalitarianism, Enlightenment, universalism, existentialism, human rights, relativism, Cold War unity, technology, and critique. It is meant to furnish a new philosophical history of the midcentury.

No one will be surprised that the rebirth of modern human rights was one discourse that grounded itself in crisis of man thought after 1945. Nor will it seem unusual that arguments for the recognition and equality of those who might go unconsidered in white America—“unmarked, universal Man”—including women, African Americans, and eventually a wide social movement—lacked standing and were repressed in the early discourse. The most surprising track may be what occurs, and what we can see in retrospect, in literature, specific manifestations of the “Great American Novel” once major specimens were written under demands and criteria from the overweening, environing discourse. It proved difficult to keep out those counterclaims of racial and gender difference.

If this book is a philosophical history, one might reasonably ask why so many of its pages are occupied with literature. The first impetus is a peculiar fact of transmission of authority. Literary critics adapted questions of the nature of man—and affirmation, reconstruction, and revival of “his” will in America—to their demands on future novelists at the same moment that these critics were accomplishing the triumphant installation of past American literature within the university and on an international stage. The standing of this formerly subordinate national art as a source of eternal truth—when read correctly by its scholars—promoted the past mere entertainment and local color and its old dependency on European models. For young writers, however, the demands and invitations to a new literature of man came wrapped in critics’ threats of irrelevance and obsolescence should new fiction fail. This was the threatened “death of the novel.”

Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Flannery O’Connor, and Thomas Pynchon were intellectuals by their ability and their felt obligation to take up questions of the crisis of man in their early major works. But these authors’ grumpy responsiveness yielded answers the early discourse could not have anticipated. *Dangling Man* (Bellow), *Invisible Man* (Ellison), and *A Good Man Hard to Find* (O’Connor) are titles that belong to the long list of meditations on the possibility of existence of any unmarked, universal moral core to man in the American midcentury. *V. V. Brown* (Pynchon), though it names the antithesis of everything animate and the antithesis of man (a figure of the prosthetic, apocalyptic female), represents an end of this line, and its partial inversion, in the transition to the sixties.

The challenge for all histories of high “ideas” is to find their entryways into vernacular thinking and practice. How does high discourse weigh upon other levels, if it does? How do we know, or prove, that it does? Many inquiries choose not to find out.

Here, fiction becomes key. Certainly Bellow, Ellison, O’Connor, and Pynchon were elites in their thought, influences, reading, and talent for creation. Yet any fiction writer faces the task of thinking *in concreto*. He or she “thinks” through formal instantiations of thinking in vernacular talk and character, in carefully calibrated deviation from verisimilitude and social plausibility, and in artful refiguring of the world as it appears. Since the fiction writer’s answers had to take stock of truths of American life that the abstract discourse did not—li-

as a Jew or an African American, life with an orthodox religious faith or hemmed in by pervasive technology—their accounts frequently undid the hopes of the original questions of man precisely on matters of “difference.” Undermining the universal pretensions of the discourse, the writers’ work anticipated an opposite turn. This was true even when, in their own views, the writers didn’t approve of difference. Life in America provoked it.

I turn to the new social movements of the sixties as a separate and distinct level of vernacular transformations of the discourse of man (“the sixties” for me names a phenomenon and set of thought-complexes rather than a calendar decade). When the sixties intervened, it wrote out in political actions and activism some of the contradictions we will have seen that the novelists had intuited or foundered on, synthesized or papered over. It must be acknowledged that the two routes for access to the vernacular do not touch. I am not claiming influence for the novelists on action or politics but formal and diagnostic depth helpful to retrospection. From the social movement, the study makes a final leap upward returning to “high” or elite thought and imagination. Vernacular ferment made an upper realm of abstract philosophy effervesce. The future of intellectual life was unexpectedly changed by new modes of post-1968 thinking within the mixed philosophical and literary phenomenon known as “Theory.”

This part of the argument could be misunderstood as culminating a chronological passage “from universalism to difference.” I hope instead to establish that universalism and difference, as we know them, are two postwar projects drawing on a tertium quid, the discourse of the crisis of man. Contemporary universalism, normativity, and “reason” do not possess an unbroken tradition that goes back before the awful sixties into a magical consensus of twilight of the American midcentury. Nor are difference and Theory all that alien to U.S. thought, or all that uniquely distinctive of advances made by Continental masters. Both trace equally long roots into the chaotic and unanswerable ruminations of the crisis of man era—genuinely transnational chaos.

The sixties make up something like a big bang for the intellectual and literary history of the rest of the twentieth century, and likely for the twenty-first. The years 1968 or 1970 marked the dawning of the period we still live in (1945 did so in a different way; say that 1945 yielded the institutions and materials and the sixties the way we configure and view them). The rhetorical terms many use for this era of ferment and explosion are words like “fracture,” “disuniting,” and “contradiction.” The perception of division may be hard to resist, especially as it draws its strength from hopes and dreams of unity that roiled in the crisis of man. Yet my argument will be that when you approach the individual pieces rocketing apart in the sixties, and sample them, you can see that they are often surprisingly made of the same stuff. Through recovery of the crisis of man, I can offer the prehistory that helps us trace back the trajectories of what now seem different intellectual galaxies, in hopes that others will compass them in a more various future.

—MG, January 31, 2011

PART I

GENESIS

INTRODUCTION

The "Crisis of Man" as Obscurity and Re-enlightenment

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, American intellectuals of manifold type from disparate and even hostile groups, converged on a perception of danger. The world had entered a new crisis by 1933, the implications of which would echo for nearly three decades to follow: not just the crisis of the liberal state, or capitalist economy generally, and not only the imminent paroxysm of the political world system in world war. The threat was now to "man." "Man" was in "crisis." This jeopardy transformed the tone and content of intellectual, political, and literary enterprise, from the late thirties forward, in ways that—because they are so intertwined with panic, piety, and the permanent philosophical questions of human nature—have still not been given an adequate accounting.

To its adherents, the crisis of man specified the danger of the end or barbarization of Western civilization. New conditions seemed destined to snap the long tradition of humanism, the filament of learning, humane confidence, and respect for human capacities that had made the intellect modern and progressive since the Renaissance. Thinkers mourned the "end of history" as a forward-moving, progressive stream; it seemed a lonesome terminus in their eyes, and not a fulfillment as in our contemporary "end of history." Their fear, above all, was that human nature was being changed, either in its permanent essence or in its lineaments for the eyes of other men. The change would have the same result in either form: the demolition of those certainties about human nature, which had been pillars for optimistic thinkers for two centuries.

The Rights of Man had been the foundation upon which modern democracies were built. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men ... are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights," the Declaration of Independence asserted in 1776. "[T]he only causes of public misfortunes and the corruption of Governments," allowed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, are the "ignorance, forgetfulness or contempt of the ... natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man."¹ After 1939, the unalienable rights of man could not be taken for granted in Europe, as "man" was being alienated and eradicated, altered and undone. These erasures largely occurred at gunpoint, of Nazi, Soviet, or fascist arms, though intellectuals took the threat to be much more general. Perhaps men had been better off in ignorance and naive hopefulness, except that, the intellectuals warned, it was this blindness that had prepared the field for the disasters of Nazism and totalitarianism.

Meditations on fundamental anthropology are as continuous a stream of introspection as one can find in the history of philosophy, alongside questions of the substance of the world and the nature of the heavens; you can reach down and pull up a dipperful of speculations on the human in any year. The distinct return of man as a center of intellectual inquiry, apart from his scientific, practical, or religious nature, marks more definite occurrences within the long philosophical trajectory of the history of the West, and the period of the interwar years and World War II constitutes one such landmark. In this moment, the modern progress of

expanded rights and protections for oppressed human groups and ignored subjects—the nonwhite, nonmale, and the nonelite—gave way to a renewed inquiry into the majoritarian, unmarked human subject itself, to change and reground the rationale for human moral status and inviolability.

From the 1930s through the 1950s, intellectuals debated a fundamental abstraction: “Whatever be the line of inquiry, the thread leads back to man. Man is the problem,” the Jewish sociologist of religion Will Herberg wrote in 1951, speaking for a perception of the uniqueness of his time.² His mentor, the Protestant neoorthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, had stated the discourse’s difficulty, however, along with its necessity, a decade earlier, near its inception: “Man has always been his own most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself? Every affirmation which he may make about his stature, virtue, or place in the cosmos becomes involved in contradictions when fully analysed.”³ Interminable analysis itself also became the intellectuals’ form of action, a means to pull others into the framework of affirmation and contradiction that their thought created.

“CRISIS” AND “MAN”

“Crisis,” in the context of 1939, had been a thundercloud continually forming new shapes since World War I. Eric Hobsbawm has stressed the thirty-one years of continuous war that define the early twentieth century, one year more than the Reformation’s bloody thirty-year realignment of Europe from 1618–48.⁴ It was a single movement, in a way, of changing political, technological, and philosophical norms for Europe. Hobsbawm observes that those shielded from intervening events, as in England and America, could see it as two discrete wars separated by a bad but recognizable peace; this is how Americans do tend to see it today. In fact, at the time, intellectuals attuned to Continental events could also see it as continuous, from whichever country they looked. From the vantage of England, E. H. Carr, the Cambridge historian, had it as the “Twenty Years’ Crisis” in 1939, a continuity of instability from Versailles to the invasion of Poland.⁵ Safely in America, the German émigré Hannah Arendt in 1951 described it in this way: “Two World Wars in one generation separated by an uninterrupted chain of local wars and revolutions, followed by no peace treaty for the vanquished and no respite for the victor,” ending “in the anticipation of a third World War between the two remaining world powers.”⁶ In any country, those with eyes open to the affairs of the world, or ready to listen to such authorities, could sense they were living in a unique and uniquely bad time.

American intellectuals who identified themselves with world politics could recite a continuous list of crises leading up to World War II. They had learned the litany from the newspapers or from networks of political comradeship: 1928, Stalin’s expulsion of Trotsky and the old revolutionaries to concentrate his power; 1929, the stock market crash and global depression; 1931, the Japanese militarists’ occupation of Manchuria; 1933, Hitler’s electoral takeover; 1935, Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia, raining bombs and poison gas on lightly armed Ethiopian soldiers; 1936, Franco’s revolt against the Spanish Republic and the rumbling bloodshed of the first fully ideologized, internationalist war in the midst of Europe; 1939, Hitler’s capture of Czechoslovakia, secret nonaggression pact with Stalin, and invasion of Poland to launch World War II. By 1940, France had capitulated, and that signified,

essence, the end of Europe. It was done. From Portugal to Spain to Russia at the further meridian of the Continent, democratic forms had expired, either by murder or acquiescent suicide. England stood alone against the ruined Continent, its shapeless island not more than twenty miles separated at Dover from the Normandy coast through which Hitler seemed likely to invade. This meant that those in the United States, who suffered none of these disasters, still knew that the political philosophy of fascism, and its means of controlling populations through terror, complicity, and mobilization (the potent trinity that was very early on called “totalitarianism”), spelled something terrible for the liberal-democratic West and the European tradition with which Americans identified.⁷ Serious arguments were proffered that the world was becoming totalitarian because the totalitarian model of the rule of men was more efficient and effective than the liberal state’s manner of leaving men to their own, proposals that reinforced the 1930s intellectuals’ habitual mistrust of liberalism and fears on its behalf. In the press, too, the world conflict reflected rival models of man. *Time*, in its year in review for 1941, pronounced in its books section, a few years late for the intellectuals, that “The greatest challenge of all” that year “was the triumphant emergence of a new human type, totalitarian man—superbly armed, deliberately destructive and dominant—at the very heart of what had been Europe’s cultural sanctuaries.”⁸

Visions of the “new man” preceded National Socialism in avant-garde artistic and political utopias of the early century.⁹ Yet Hitler’s revolution made the rhetoric distinctively its own. Contemporaries could cite Hitler’s boast to Hermann Rauschning: “Those who see in National Socialism nothing more than a political movement know scarcely anything of it. It is more than a religion: it is the will to create mankind anew.”¹⁰ Historians of fascism validated the seriousness with which observers in the thirties viewed promises that today seem outlandish, as research has confirmed the centrality of new man theory to propaganda and practice.¹¹ Joachim Fest has emphasized how “[i]n countless speeches and proclamations Hitler again and again conjured up the image of the ‘new man,’ and the many people who acclaimed the regime, who applauded every step it made and every point in its program celebrated the development of this man as the dawn of ‘the truly golden age.’”¹² The cynicism and idealism of the people-shaping program of the Nazi leadership was familiar to Americans who had read the regime’s chief scriptures.¹³ In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler warned “that by the clever and continuous use of propaganda a people can even be made to mistake heaven for hell, and vice versa, the most miserable life for Paradise.”¹⁴ In the other official best seller of Nazi Germany, the Aryan race theory diatribe titled *The Myth of the 20th Century*, Alfred Rosenberg specified that the “measures taken on all social planes to mould a new human type” would define a complementary “task of the twentieth century.”¹⁵

Humanity was divided, said new man theory. The divisions must be accelerated and completed. National Socialists must be taught to identify declining specimens, a subhumanity within humanity. This was *Der Untermensch*, eponymous subject of an SS tract from 1933: “For all is not equal which bears a human face! Woe to him who forget[s] this!”¹⁶ Against the Aryan ideal stood the degenerate image specified in the Nazi book *The Counter-Type (Der Gegentyp)*, 1938), which “stated clearly what was involved in the sharp distinction.”¹⁷ Italian fascism advertised comparable ambitions to divide and transform man. Mussolini’s famous 1932 article in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, ghostwritten by Giovanni Gentile, extolled a new “fascist

man,” while at the “totalitarian leap” (*svolta totalitariana*) later in the decade, “[a]nother activist party secretary, Achille Starace ... led a campaign to shape the Fascist ‘new man’ by instituting ‘Fascist customs,’ ‘Fascist language,’ and racial legislation.”¹⁸

But Hitler excelled all other totalitarian visionaries in his institutions for reshaping the clay of human life and firing it through violence and crime. “In my great educative work,” Hitler said, “I am beginning with the young. ... In my *Ordensburgen* [the Nazi academies] youth will grow up before which the world will shrink back. A violently active, dominating, intrepid, brutal youth—that is what I am after. ... In this way I will eradicate the thousands of years of human domestication. Then I shall have in front of me the pure and noble natural material. With that I can create the new order.”¹⁹

With the US entry into the war after Pearl Harbor, government and mass-market magazines began to take up the language of the new crisis, adding the values of man to those fundamentals that democratic armies defended. *Fortune* magazine produced a major unsigned statement by the editors: “The Heart of the Problem: Without Vision of Deep Purpose We Shall Perish,” and turned to professors of philosophy and theologians for “a general meaning.”²⁰ Professor William Ernest Hocking of Harvard, in an article on “What Man Can Make of Man,” warned that “In all our doings, and by way of these doings, something is happening to human nature.”²¹ The French neo-Thomist theologian Jacques Maritain proposed that “the only way of regeneration for the human community is a rediscovery of the true image of man”—in his case, a Catholic image.²² As a new School of the Humanities was launched at Stanford in 1942, its dean posed, against the outer crisis of the Axis onslaught, the “internal crisis” of the new sense of man, both for evil and good: “Today we see [man] turning the weapons of his brain against himself—groping, amid the noise of a tottering civilization, for some faith in man to which he can cling.”²³

One can detect much in the early discourse of the crisis of man that is desperate and hortatory. But philosophical intellectuals and practical commentators of the true crisis of man in discourse alike tried to understand why Europe had gone under and how England and America might not. They asked what man was, in what part of himself he should have steady faith, and how he had come to this pass. A confusion and difficulty of the philosophical intellectuals’ enterprise is that they were claiming to ask anew a question that we know they had always asked. Philosophers had contemplated man’s nature for three thousand years. “What is man?” as a discrete phrase is a cliché twice over, and belongs to two different points of origin. One is the Bible: “What is man?” is heard in both Job and Psalms.²⁴ But “What is man?” held a hallowed place, too, in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. It is remembered from the handbook to Kant’s *Logic*, where he says that there are only four true questions of philosophy in its universal sense: “What can I know?,” “What ought I to do?,” “What may I hope?,” and “What is man?”²⁵

When the intellectuals took up man in the recognizable language and concepts of midcentury, they created a historically specific configuration. These intellectuals attempted to wrench the question free of the context of homiletics, invest it with the utmost urgency, and answer it inductively in a single book, sometimes of 300, 600, or 700 pages. Their seriousness was not a hoax. The inquiry was taken up by major thinkers not dealing in clichés or trafficking in old religion. Yet there is always something odd, unnerving, in this tenacious

grasping of a question that really might have deserved its neglect as a sermon title or lecture-room chalkboard scribble. And one is struck by how many significant secular books of the period begin, in their first line, with the cliché, making no attempt to evade the echo. “What is man?” the German émigré philosopher Ernst Cassirer labels his first section of a short summary book of 1944 written for Americans to cover the body of his own thought on the fundamental questions of philosophical anthropology.²⁶ “What is man?” the native-born historian and urban theorist Lewis Mumford begins another major book of 1944 within his series of researches on civilization and technology.²⁷ It is in the dissident theologians’ work, well, renewed: Martin Buber, for example, used the phrase in a mixed philosophical and theological register (as “Was ist der mensch?”) in his inaugural 1938 course of lectures as an émigré to Jerusalem, after years of being monitored and harassed by the Gestapo.²⁸

Man became at midcentury the figure everyone insisted must be addressed, recognized, helped, rescued, made the center, the measure, the “root,” and released for “what was in him. But the thinkers who encouraged this were not, themselves, naive. Paragons of erudition, most knew the shape of other answers, the profusion of historical shrubs and undergrowth on this plot of ground that might tempt one to call the query an unanswerable. The more skeptical among them acknowledged that every effort to specify what the quiddity was that defined man seemed doomed. They had to admit to many previous definitions, as the Oxford philosopher R. G. Collingwood noted:

We know, or at least we have been told, a great deal about Man; that God made him a little lower than the angels; that Nature made him the offspring of apes; that he has an erect posture, to which his circulatory system is ill adapted, and four incisors in each jaw which are less liable to decay than the rest of his teeth, but more liable to be knocked out; that he is a rational animal, a risible animal, a tool-using animal, an animal unique in ferocious and malevolent towards his kind; that he is assured of God, freedom, and immortality, and endowed with means of grace, which he prefers to neglect, and the hope of glory, which he prefers to exchange for the fear of hell-fire; and that all his weal and all his woe is a by-product of his Oedipus complex or, alternatively, of his ductless glands.²⁹

Still, Collingwood sat down to write his *New Leviathan: Or, Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism* in 1942, in the midst of the bombardment of London, as the only way he knew to contribute to the war effort. Knowing already the difficulty or even absurdity of the project, he began his book, too, with those three words that open other books of the period: “What is Man?”³⁰ And he intended—like the others—to answer.

ANSWERS AND NON-ANSWERS

In one sense, the intense early thinkers of the discourse of man did answer their question. They said what man was and what he must do. What he must do was, generally, to stay, or become, whatever they said he was already, or to avoid becoming, or not surrender to whatever he was tempted to be but should not be. The shape of the answers becomes clear through comparison. They enjoy a limited range of variety.

For Reinhold Niebuhr, man was a being made by God, yet one who sinned in hubristic efforts at self-transcendence (an orthodox theological answer). For Ernst Cassirer, man was

naturally made to transcend himself through intellect, his only “essence” his functional ability to frame concepts as symbols and thereby extend his humanity (a neo-Kantian philosophical answer). For Martin Buber, humanity was that which emerged in the semimystical relationship between man and man, having reality neither in the individual nor in the collective (a mystical theological answer). For Julian Huxley, man must be measured scientifically by his “welfare, development, and active participation in social processes” and would be defined by a less personal social standard in the new “Age of Social Man” (a utopian technocratic answer). For Collingwood, man would persist only in a civil community, which meant one in which all human relations were purged of the use of force (a liberal philosophical answer). For Erich Fromm, man would indeed be *known* ever more deeply by psychological science, but in his “physico-spiritual” nature, which existed primarily for the better, peaceful realization of a permanent happiness (a humanistic psychological answer). For C. S. Lewis, men must learn the *tao*, the unity of religious-moral knowledge that underlies all human nature (a conservative amateur-apologetical answer). While for Sartre, “[m]an is nothing else but what he makes of himself” in responsibility and anxiety, inescapably modeling an idea of man for others (an existentialist answer).³¹

In a different sense, these weren’t answers at all. They were, rather, elevations or promotions of one value or position to the status of an ultimacy. Or they were stakes, in the sense of commitments, “antes” in a hand at cards—starting points in the guise of endings. Their challenge seems to lie in the status of any single claim within the context of a multiplicity of answers—a multiplicity sure to be expanded, not convergently diminished, by the repetition of the insistence that one must answer. It would be wrong to be disappointed by the closeness of the thinkers’ answers to their previous positions, but it might be equally wrong to judge the significance of this particular claim as comparable to other of their claims to truth and argument.

Besides the puzzling status of the underlying discourse and its mode of answers, however—and although in summary of individual positions it can seem as if the thinkers talked past one another entirely—we can in fact notice that constellations of positions emerge in four areas of great importance. Here were the subquestions of that overwhelming question and imperative: What is man and how shall we rediscover him? These areas were passed on, to later iterations of the discourse among debaters and writers of the late 1940s, the 1950s, and early 1960s.

The first area of concern was with what man was himself, and whether there existed anything fundamental beneath his facade, a human nature, determinate and accessible, where all else was social and unreliable. I will call this level of concern by its traditional name of philosophical anthropology, the “philosophy of man,” or simply the “question” of man and human nature. Was there even such a thing as an abstract, universal man? Was there an individual, freestanding nature that could exist beyond all demands of collectives of men? Should there be such individuality, or was community (of the right kind) a necessary part of human nature?

The second area of preoccupation was with the shape of history. The history questions included fears that the twentieth-century cataclysms had shown that the chronology of civilized development was not as people had previously imagined it, that events perhaps had no good order, or that previous fantasies of historical destiny and inevitability had actual

led to these violent disasters and therefore needed to be reconceived. Was it possible or desirable to rehabilitate any sense of direction in history?

Third was a concern with faith—a vague word—as a worry about both religion and ideology. What sort of beliefs could and should be maintained in the midst of a world turned upside down? Thinkers wondered whether it was possible or wise to believe in anything abstract, lest it lead to the further abuse of concrete human life, after dogmatic belief—Germany, Italy, and Russia—had led to the worst disasters. Yet how would they go on without a faith in progress, in God, or simply in a natural supremacy of good rather than evil in the world? It had a concrete political reference, too, in concerns over a “crisis of liberalism,” meaning both economy and democracy, and the fear that even if one felt no temptation to totalitarianism, one possessed no reliable historical model for political order under new global conditions.

The fourth area, finally, was a fear about technology, in the sense that human technologies might be outstripping or perverting humane thought and goals. Technology in this debate included material artifacts like machines and bombs, and factory systems to make them, and also human techniques, especially the forms of technique that would organize men and women (whether in collective “planning,” usually counted as good by the political left) and center, and questioned by voices on the laissez-faire right, or in machine control and the de-individualizing propensity of technical efficiency, which was universally accounted bad).

If the human nature and faith questions seem abstract while the history and technology questions are specific, this mismatch very much belonged to the intellectual texture of the age, in an effort to attach the empirical to the spiritual, to hold together evanescent beliefs with hard facts of destruction, which were much too present. Human nature, in this particular discourse, is not really about physiology or evolution. “History” means the philosophy of history’s shape and cycles. “Faith” is less about specific doctrines than the socially binding or undermining function of belief itself. Even technology turns into “technics,” an autonomous world-reordering force.

THE USES OF EMPTINESS

One of the striking features of the discourse of man to modern eyes, in a sense the most striking, is how unreadable it is, how tedious, how unhelpful. The puzzle is why it is unreadable. I don’t believe that it’s only because the context, or our assumptions, have changed, or because the discourse of man was finished off by different claims—though all of that is true. Rather, the discourse of man was somewhat empty in its own time, even where it was at its best; empty for a reason, or, one could say, meaningful because it was empty.

Because “empty” belongs to an everyday, nontechnical language, it may be misunderstood. I draw a distinction between two very different forms of cultural conversation: empty discourse and cant discourse. The crisis of man had both, usually but not always among different sets of intellectuals and spokesmen. A cant discourse is one in which the words deliberately do not mean anything that can be questioned, argued about, or refined by disagreement. In such a case, the words themselves, as symbols of mystery or profundity, credential the speaker’s other utterances without adding discriminable content. Cant represents a default of thought, and likely bad faith. It may originate as shorthand for a

original debate that no longer exists in the consciousness of its hearers, or it may be floated in order to evade a discussion that the user was never capable of sustaining. It becomes counterfeit that drives out the good.

The utility of the discourse of man for cant was something that troubled its intellectual especially in the later years. Perhaps “the dignity of man” suffered this collapse a midcentury more than any other formulation.³² In this strain, the “dignity of man” could be made a name for whatever was good about American democracy and bad about the USSR since one system (democracy) knew what people were “really like” and the other (authoritarian socialism) betrayed human dignity. Or the “crisis of man” itself could become a name for the existence of people without religion or values, or individuals made lonely by the individualism and anonymity of cities in alienation; in short, a new name for some features of the modern, which had been better diagnosed by Durkheim, Weber, or many sociologists from the turn of the century to its middle.

However, there *was* a useful empty discourse of man, something quite distinct, coherent, and credible, if not necessarily always lovable or redeemable seventy-five years after the fact. The midcentury discourse that, in the face of the massive degradation of the rights of man, tried to rediscover a foundation for man’s protection simply said: there must be something that must be protected. The human agency to protect this unknown quantity was absent. And so there was a strong temptation to imagine this protection as self-authorizing and auto-guaranteed. Man must carry his warrant within himself, like his heart or lungs. Any person should have it—whatever it should be, from wherever it came.

The gesture in the best part of the crisis of man that substitutes for grounding, and does the real work of the discourse, was the gesture itself of saying “we must protect.” Also “there must be something to protect.” Finally, “there must be something that protects itself.” What makes it empty, however, is the consequence when participants successively phrase an answer, rephrase, and reanswer their questions in the service of these imperatives. An empty discourse is one that behaves as if it wishes to be filled with a single inductive or deductive answer—a definitive argument meant to persuade all hearers and end inquiry through complete satisfaction—but in fact generates the continuation of attempts, or tacitly admits its unanswerability.

The value of acknowledging this kind of discourse as knowledge might be brought out by a familiar analogy to the therapy of ordinary language philosophy on linguistic analysis. Classic linguistic analysis in philosophy thinks of language most often for its function of description of true or false states of affairs: “Socrates is a man.” “The cat is on the mat.” Ordinary language philosophy pointed out the significant presence of multiple classes of meaningful statements that do not describe states of affairs. Best remembered are “performatives” (in J. L. Austin’s long-ago coinage), including such statements as “I thank you,” “I wed,” “I dub thee knight,” “I christen thee *Britannia*,” in which the utterance of each of these statements in certain conditions performed an act.³³ Such a speech-act changed a state of affairs in the world through its utterance as a statement, not by itself offering any rival description or proposition.

Say that the form of discourse in the discourse of the crisis of man, too, is not an ordinary truth-describing discourse. It does not cause convergence upon a solution through adversarial arguments and tests. True, each individual participant in the discourse of the crisis of man

may give, indeed, is very likely and even duty bound to supply, a single descriptive claim: “Man is X.” My concern—quite difficult to resolve at the level of individual participant psychology, and perhaps only to be decided at the higher level of function and effect—is that it doesn’t seem quite right that when each thinker says “Man is X,” this is truly being promoted as a single, provable explanation, intended to end all debate. The underlying utterance, say, in all these presentations, remains both collective and imperative: “*We must* give a new or renewed statement of what man is.” One does not, in fact, expect to stop others from giving answers; one anticipates ever more answers. The proliferation of answers, not their conclusion, seems to be the underlying point.

GENRES, CHARACTERISTICS, AND SCOPE

Characteristic genres of the discourse of man include collective forms that critics of literature and thought ordinarily hold in ill-repute. One is the series of articles by disparate authorities on a theme or keyword. Another is the anthology. A third is the multiply signed “credo”—more like a monument in front of town hall than a manifesto—combining the prestige of intellectual authorities who but for the present emergency would possess no point of contact. The intellectually arbitrary nature of such formal devices contributes to their force in practice—“here are some geniuses who disagree on all things, but *not this*.” When lions lie down with lambs because both fear a bigger beast, humankind must take notice.

As prose objects, instances of these genres can induce the vertigo of hearing a portentous speaker utter completely incompatible statements on fundamentals—like the nameless collective voice in *The City of Man* (1940), tilting between theism and atheism to match its many authors and signatories: “Universal and total democracy is the principle of liberty and life which the dignity of man opposes to the principle of slavery and spiritual death represented by totalitarian autocracy. ... Democracy is nothing more and nothing less than humanism in theocracy and rational theocracy in universal humanism. ... Democracy teaches that everything must be within humanity, nothing against humanity, nothing outside humanity.”³⁴ Or it suggests an all-inclusive emptiness and circularity, as in the introduction to an exemplary anthology: “Man is a totality; Man is a unity; and it is irrelevant to a true estimation of his nature to develop an infinite multiplicity of doctrines concerning his nature—a scientific one, a philosophical one, a psychological one, a religious one, a secular or sociological one.” For an answer that supplanted others would be in effect totalitarian: “[I]t is productive of tragic consequences to subordinate all other methods to a single approach, whether it be a theological, a rationalistic, or an empirical one.”³⁵ In the mass magazine series, the reader can get the impression that it would be preferable to forget the content of each previous month’s installment by the arrival of the new one.

The characteristic rhetoric and figures of speech of the discourse of the crisis of man turned to spatial figures, and a simultaneous preoccupation above all with limits and depth. The architectonic was inner, vertical, and spherical—of shells and cores, and Man enclosed by nature and intelligence. Sketched, it would look like Vitruvian Man, whom Leonardo drew touching both the circle and the square. Attachment occurred downward by roots, or upward in aspiration of transcendence. Kinship existed in a family conceived as circular, “nuclear” (for the tiny triad at the nucleus), or tied in a “brotherhood” of individuals who stood to one

another in relations simultaneously of identity and fraternity: the human family, alike a paper dolls, linking hands and girdling the earth.

The discourse's intellectual trajectory rose and declined. It gained urgency in the debate over intervention, expanded once the United States entered the war, reached an intellectual peak by 1951, and, at that point, was popularized and banalized. Yet America did not recover "closure" after the war. On the contrary, it expanded its responsibility to the world, at least the "free world." It may be crucial to know even at this stage of our inquiry that intellectuals through the 1950s would declare the crisis not over; it was only being swept of its detritus and obstructions, the twigs the storm had broken, to be seen ever more clearly. The depression began even before the Cold War took firm hold, and remained as the Cold War renewed the crisis and somewhat altered its meaning again, in the firming up of bipolarity and the fracturing of the world into hostile camps, United States and Soviet.

The literary critic Newton Arvin tried to explain the widespread return to "fundamentalism" in 1950: "For one thing, the nerves of even the most imperturbable might, none incomprehensibly, have been deeply shaken in the last thirty-six years and especially in the last four or five."³⁶ Just to make clear what he is saying: Arvin was proposing that the "four or five" postwar years from 1945–50 might have been more nerve-racking for Americans than the whole rest of the thirty-year crisis since the beginning of World War I. Delmore Schwartz in 1951 described the "mounting and endless crisis" and a "postwar period" that had "quickly assumed the appearance and generated the atmosphere of a new pre-war period."³⁷

Large numbers of people may have felt they ought to have something to say, or know something, or do something, about man. While some of this had to do with the emotion of wartime, it was also a function of elites and public spokesmen who felt it their duty to oblige their fellow men to think about man. The discourse of man was not a popular discourse at its origins. It came from the top and settled downward, finding its way into small official speeches and, presumably, into the crevices of minds. One runs across publications like the one in 1950 from a charitable lecture group called the "Church Peace Union":

APPENDIX B. SUGGESTIONS FOR ARRANGING A SEMINAR ON THE NATURE OF MAN

Those who have read this book will realize that a study of human nature is not an academic pastime in our day. We have seen that leaders of thought trace the so-called "crisis in our civilization" to a crisis in man himself. Hence they tell us that if we would understand our age with its problems of crucial importance, we must find a deeper insight into the nature of man. ...

SPEAKERS

Many communities could arrange a series on the nature of man by using its own leaders in the schools, professional fields and business world. ...

PROMOTION

The entire series as well as each meeting must be given wide publicity. ...

It may also be possible to arrange for programs on the radio—brief addresses by guest speakers or round table discussions on several of the subjects.

And so forth, in "the hope that other communities across the land will arrange series of

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF NEGLECT

The 1940s, the initial center of gravity for this study, are often just treated in American intellectual history as interim years of war (as if thought stopped during the largest single cataclysm of the century), or as a divided period, a wishbone that goes half to the “thirties” and half to the “fifties.” The thirties, as the remains of the period of “radicalism” and social consciousness, pick up some portions of the war decade, though often in their dimensions of retrenchment and intellectual retreat. The war’s massive mobilization, and the period of consumer abundance and yet intellectual anxiety and doubt after the war, get taken up in the Cold War and the “adjustment,” “consensus,” and “conformity” that define the stereotypes of the decade of the fifties and the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. Even many of the best scholars of the 1940s look for particular impasses or divisions that can break the decade in two.³⁹

The crisis of man and its project of re-enlightenment yield a different periodization without such a sharp split: a complete and consistent phase of thought from 1933 to 1951 in which intellectuals looked outward to shared, new threats, and from 1952 to 1973 a still continuous phase of philosophical demand and rethinking, turning inward toward America while revolving concrete answers, rebukes, and rejoinders to the questions of the earlier period.

It would be odd if scholars had not noted or assessed the discourse of the crisis of man before. They have. Closer to the era itself, in an effort to understand the background to the experience of the 1960s, Edward Purcell wrote a 1972 history of the 1930s and 1940s as part of a “crisis of democratic theory” that is close to my own early account.⁴⁰ In political science and jurisprudence, man appeared to translate to the democratic subject or citizen, whom United States thinkers questioned in order to seek new grounds for defense. In art history, the scholar of abstract expressionism Michael Leja identified man discourse on the other side of 1945, about discerning what he termed “the discourse of Modern Man” as a background to Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and their cohort of American painters and their critics.⁴¹ One can piece together a rich and accomplished bibliography on many of the subtopics that the discourse of the crisis of man underwrites in this period: totalitarianism, existentialism, world war, and Cold War propaganda, theological conflicts, human rights, and the United Nations.

The inability to think of the discourse as a generative matrix that subtends these domains and time slices, however, has not just been a matter of chance. The strictures on thought in this area have sometimes had polemical bases, often of the same vintage as the discourse of man itself. We can also write a historiography of neglect. No stricture has been more obtrusive than the thesis of “deradicalization” (also called “depoliticization”). The accusation emerged in the 1940s in internecine fighting on the intellectual left, and only much later migrated from the status of a political attack between former allies to reign as a dominant historiographical thesis. One thus finds a very young Irving Howe, at this point in 1941 associated with one Trotskyist faction, articulating the full thesis in order to criticize another ex-Trotskyist faction with whom he was still friendly. (His immediate target was Dwight Macdonald’s *Politics*; Macdonald had used the same charge in 1940 and 1941 to criticize h

rivals; a later democratic-socialist Howe, too, as editor of *Dissent*, would find his own place within the crisis of man repositioning):

The political development of the American “left” intellectuals since the great depression may be charted in four major trends: their attraction to radical politics in the early thirties; their subsequent break from Stalinism and turn to Trotskyism; their retreat from Marxism in the late thirties; and finally their flight from politics in general ... [in] turns to religion, absolute moralism, psychoanalysis and existentialist philosophy as *substitutes* for politics.⁴²

The historical tradition that follows from this polemical chronology dismisses the puzzles and incomprehensibilities of the discourse of man by switching focus to the decline of institutional leftism in the 1930s and 1940s. Historians identify themselves with one or another position of the Old Left. This yields counterfactual speculation on what the discourse of the crisis of man might have substituted for, without trying to reconcile the difficult questions of what it actually was.⁴³

The obverse of this mode of neglect is the historiography that constitutes a long progress of progressive-liberal uplift and triumph rather than radical decline. Here, the enigmas and abstractions of the interruption of crisis, and the questionings of man, are not interesting or in need of explanation on their own; they are subsumed within a longer practical project—the influential work of David Hollinger, for example, “inclusion.” On this story, from the turn of the twentieth century through the early 1960s, white American intellectuals fought to include more and more classes of people in progressive, pragmatic, liberal-Protestant unity in efforts to defuse prejudice and division.⁴⁴ This hopeful line, also historically true for its particular protagonists and at its level of chronology, has the consequence that one cannot really treat the sixties, difference, and “multiculturalism” historically except as a betrayal of prior idealism.⁴⁵ Other individual accounts do accept that a “crisis” in thought occurred during the midcentury around totalitarianism and the war—often anachronistically attaching it primarily to knowledge of the Holocaust—but seek the triumphant academic reconstructions that overcame it.⁴⁶ The most stimulating histories on this side of the evaluative coin understand “unity” to have been a complicated project, or a congeries of discrete projects, without automatically celebrating its solutions.⁴⁷ This mode of historical neutrality can be undermined by the fact, however, that the unity, reconstruction, and inclusiveness projects that generated the most unambiguous archives were often those sponsored by the state, or by what we now call “nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)”-sources that quickly look like propaganda, for their effort to convince others to unify rather than wrestling with their own doubts or questionings. And once a historian becomes suspicious that the archive is propaganda, the analytical mood is likely to tip back to the more hostile side of the historiographical divide—regretting deradicalization and false unity, and wishing history had furnished something better.

THE QUESTION OF EXCLUSION

Moreover, to contemporary eyes, the discourse where it is most active and intense neglects some forms of difference that we would think should be acknowledged, if only to be

appreciated and included. It was certainly a discourse favorable to “the human family” and “the brotherhood of man,” and its rhetoric was useful to antiprejudice campaigns.⁴⁸ But one begins to wonder if the delineation of a human core emerged in some way to regulate who to accept and whom to ignore. In the discourse’s midst, one finds encomia to the overcoming of difference in unexpected places, as when Hans Kohn, the rather factual and dry Jewish émigré diplomatic historian, ensconced at Smith College and later Harvard, dedicates one of his series of books about Europe’s crisis: “To Those/Who Strove and Fought/For the Dignity of the Human Being/For the Oneness of the Human Kind.”⁴⁹ Yet this “oneness” vibrated at a very high level of abstraction. A previous dedicatory page in the series quoted Goethe on “humanity,” Kant on universal history and the goal of a universal republic, and one bar from the ode of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.⁵⁰ The truth of the high-intellectual discourse of the crisis of man is essentially that it was so assured of its own wishful operation at a level of universality that it could leave basic forms of exclusion and inclusion unthought. It did not have to actively regulate exclusion, because it was incapable of believing difference to have real meaning for its concerns.

Was there no “crisis of woman”? No “crisis of color” in the country where W.E.B. Du Bois edited *The Crisis* until 1934, on the basis that the biggest American problem of the century was the problem of the color line? Two of the most important exclusions from the early UN discourse of the crisis of man were indeed those of women and of African American men and women. These groups’ exclusion would matter intrinsically, but also because, from those two perspectives, intellectuals would raise voices later, in the 1960s, to make the most influential and forceful assertions of access to a discourse that they no longer necessarily wanted to join in its original form. Those who did raise their voices in the 1940s were often ignored. Precisely because such positions are excluded, one must look to special events of catalysis and momentary visibility to see their efforts, to recent specialist histories that have documented their repression, and to individual exceptions that broke through to the public culture (seeing these exceptions as latently representative of what others couldn’t say).

At the founding of the United Nations, the inscription of human rights into global law and discourse, beyond the boundaries of any single country, was fought for especially hard by organizations representing “minorities.” (We will return to the larger filiation of human rights from the discourse of man in [chapter 3](#).) But as the historian Glenda Sluga has written, “No. Stanton Barney, writing in the feminist periodical *Equal Rights* in 1946, echoed the sentiments of numerous feminist lobbyists of the UN organization when she claimed: ‘We all know only too well, and have heard only too often great speeches on human rights by people who have in mind only the rights of men, and never think of the human rights of women.’”⁵¹ Eleanor Roosevelt had been made chairwoman of the Commission on Human Rights, representing the United States. She had been chosen in large part for her enormous prestige as wife of the leader of the Allies, the late Franklin Delano Roosevelt; also because human rights were considered diplomatically minor compared to the Security Council and General Assembly, therefore an appropriate outlet for women’s topics and inclinations. Still, only one other woman served as a nation’s delegate to the Commission: Hansa Mehta of India, an activist and legislator involved in Indian independence.

According to Kirsten Sellars, “Mehta, and members of the Commission on the Status of Women,” objected to a preamble proclaiming “All men are brothers,” “and proposed instead

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