

Introduction

Minor Utopias and the Visionary Temperament

The history of the twentieth century is almost always written as the story of a series of catastrophes. Over four decades, I too have contributed to this apocalyptic vision of the recent past. Yet for many years I have felt that this dominant historical narrative is incomplete. This book is an attempt to fill in some of what has been left out. In particular, I want to tell the story of moments in the twentieth century when a very disparate group of people tried in their separate ways to imagine a radically better world. I term these people “minor utopians,” to differentiate them from others whose “major utopias” wound up producing mountains of victims on a scale the world had rarely seen. “Major utopians” like Stalin and Hitler murdered millions of people in their efforts to transform the world.

No one can claim that historians of the twentieth century have spent

too little time on Stalin and Hitler. Interest in their lives and crimes is perennial and, at times, alarmingly voyeuristic. Evil fascinates. Instead, I want to suggest that while attending to the shadow of the Holocaust and the Gulag, it is worthwhile to turn to more obscure facets of recent history of a very different character. Alongside the major utopians, there have been minor utopians, people who configured limited and much less sanguinary plans for partial transformations of the world. This book attempts to tell their story. It is not a continuous one, but a series of moments of possibility, of openings, of hopes and dreams rarely realized, but rarely forgotten as well. The contrast between major and minor utopias and utopians forms the core of this book. Let us consider what this distinction can yield.

The Utopian Tradition

“Utopia” is a term coined by Thomas More, the sixteenth-century English divine and statesman. The term means “no-place,” not to be found on the map. It exists; we just haven’t found it yet. The term is easily (and intentionally confused) with “Eutopia,” the place of happiness. This homonym suggests something about what utopia is, and also the playfulness of its inventors.¹ By speculating on the empty spaces on the map, we are in a position to define better the ones we know, or think we know.

Since the time of Thomas More, hundreds of literary utopias have been conjured up.² In the twentieth century, there have been many of them, and of their mirror image, “dystopias,” nightmares about a place or a time where absolute evil has triumphed.³ Through George Orwell’s *1984* (1948) or Margaret Atwood’s *A Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), to take two well-known examples, millions of readers have come to know about utopia and its perversions. Science fiction has utopian elements, though it sometimes substitutes the ambiance of the exotic for social thought.

Utopia is more than a literary phenomenon. It has been the core, the driving force, of many political and social movements. Many people in

this century have believed that fundamental elements of conflict and misery can be eliminated once and for all through social action. They imagine not only piecemeal reform, but root and branch transformations. The founders of the kibbutz movement in Israel were utopians; their achievements are matters of dispute. Vast projects of urban development have emerged from utopian visions; the results have been mixed at best.⁴ There is no doubt, though, about the outcome of other utopian projects. Under communism and under fascism, gigantic plans for the transformation of society through murderous social engineering and the elimination of internal enemies produced massive suffering and injustice on a scale which beggars description.

It would be a mistake, though, to see the utopian temperament as a form of derangement, a mild or severe mental disorder leading inevitably to ruin. Religious movements have always harbored utopian elements, though only occasionally have they dominated the mainstream, as in Iran after the fall of the Shah in 1978.⁵ Ecological groups believe in saving the world in another way, just as the nuclear disarmament movement believed in the 1960s and 1980s. Their hopes are directed toward averting catastrophe rather than toward constructing an ideal society. But the first is, of course, a precondition for the second.

Utopia is a discourse in two contradictory parts. First, it is a narrative about discontinuity. It is a story through which men and women imagine a radical act of disjunction, enabling people, acting freely and in concert with others, to realize the creative potential imprisoned by the way we live now. But secondly, since the narrative is written by men and women rooted in contemporary conditions and language, it inevitably shows where they are, even as it describes where they want to be. Utopias force us to face the fact that we do not live there; we live here, and we cannot but use the language of the here and now in all our imaginings.⁶ That is why the work of the imagination is such a powerful entry point into the historical contradictions of this (or any other) period.

Utopia, in sum, is a fantasy about the limits of the possible, a staging of what we take for granted, what is left unsaid about our current social conventions and political cultures. Those who expose these silences,

often playfully, begin to disturb the contradictions in the way we live.⁷ As Paul Ricoeur has argued, “from this ‘no place’ an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted.”⁸ What is made strange is made contingent, and what is contingent need not last forever.

Minor Utopias

This book is not a history of twentieth-century utopias, though it is important to recognize the enduring character of the utopian tradition. As I have noted, the term “utopia” is now thoroughly discredited by contamination through association with the crimes of the great killers of the twentieth century. Major utopias of that kind have indeed been constructed by politicians turned gardeners, in Bauman’s phrase, “weeders” of the undesirable elements in our world. Major utopians uproot, cleanse, transform, exterminate.⁹ Their totalitarian visions, and their commitment to the ruthless removal from the world of those malevolent elements blocking the path to a beneficent future, are at the heart of what I term “major utopias.”

In this book, I want to explore a different cultural and political space, one sketched out in 1982 by Gabriel García Márquez in his speech accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature. In Stockholm, standing in the place of his master William Faulkner, who had received the prize three decades before, García Márquez reflected on Faulkner’s refusal to accept annihilation as man’s inevitable fate: “Faced with this awesome reality that must have seemed a mere utopia through all of human time, we, the inventors of tales, who will believe anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to engage in the creation of the opposite utopia. A new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth.”¹⁰

In light of García Márquez’s plea, I will tell the story of what may be

termed “minor utopias,” imaginings of liberation usually on a smaller scale, without the grandiose pretensions or the almost unimaginable hubris and cruelties of the “major” utopian projects. In each chapter, I analyze visions of partial transformations, of pathways out of the ravages of war, or away from the indignities of the abuse of human rights. Such imaginings are powerful and sketch out a world very different from the one we live in, but from which not all social conflict or all oppression has been eliminated.

This notion of minor utopias is illustrated in Tom Stoppard’s recent theatrical trilogy presenting the ideas of the nineteenth-century Russian thinker Alexander Herzen. The central character, Herzen urges his son (and the rest of us) to sail toward the “coast of utopia,” but never to imagine that there is some holy grail to be found inland.¹¹ Herzen, in this sense, was indeed a minor utopian; a visionary without a blueprint of a future society in which social conflict no longer existed.

What distinguishes nineteenth-century from twentieth-century visions is the social context in which each unfolded. Many utopian projects of the nineteenth century were constructed against the backdrop of the upheavals associated with the French and the industrial revolutions, and the social movements spawned by each. In the twentieth century, some visionaries followed in this tradition, but others took as their point of departure a different set of upheavals arising from collective violence. It is the emergence of total war which has set the twentieth century apart and which has given to many twentieth-century visions their particular coloration and urgency. The complex and subtle dialectic between minor utopian visions and massive collective violence is at the core of this book.

Languages of Social Transformation

In the early part of the twentieth century, projects of social transformation centered around nation or social class as the carriers of a better future. In the second half of the century, such visions had different inflections and emphases. From the 1940s, and increasingly after 1968,

minor utopians have focused less on nation and social class and more on civil society and human rights.

This contrast must be qualified. To be sure, since the 1960s the struggle for civil rights has been central to the history of the United States, Northern Ireland, and South Africa from the 1960s. But alongside this well-known trajectory was another one. The dream of a new human rights regime announced by René Cassin in 1948 (see chapter 4) was about the individual, not as a member of a social class or nation, but as the common denominator of humanity. Cassin spoke for human rights, not for civil rights. The notion of *Autogestion*, or local autonomy, central to the events of 1968 (see chapter 5), originated within the Marxist tradition, but quickly moved outside of it, to privilege ecological, feminist, and transnational perspectives developed on the local and urban, rather than exclusively on the national level. The quest for what is termed “global citizenship,” so evident in the 1990s and after (see chapter 6), emerges directly out of the struggle for human rights and humanitarian action.

While social thinking in the early and in the later twentieth century overlap, the discourse of social transformation has shifted. At the end of the century, the quest for world peace had lost its mobilizing force. So had the Marxist tradition. Ebullient capitalism still had its advocates, but the gap between “north” and “south,” and between rich and poor within the “north” has made capitalist triumphalism look threadbare at best. The early years of the twenty-first century seem light years away from the optimism of the Paris expo of 1900. Too much blood and too much suffering separate the two. In the space vacated by these earlier projects, late-twentieth-century visionaries adopted a more limited, decentered, eclectic, transnational approach, which paradoxically aims at the construction of “global civil society.”

Critical Distance

This is not a book of advocacy. One danger of this kind of cultural history is the adoption of an uncritical stance towards thinkers and their

projects. Hagiography serves no useful purpose, even though some of the figures whose ideas are surveyed in this book lived admirable lives. In exploring these visions of possible futures, I draw on two perspectives.

The first is a variation of Marx's dictum that men make history but not in the way they think they do, not under the conditions of their choosing. Visionaries imagine alternative forms of social life, but not in the way they think they do. They frequently carry within their thinking the very contradictions they seek to supersede. Thus Woodrow Wilson's notion of self-determination never escaped from the imperialist setting which he both decried and embodied. The 1937 Paris expo was a paean to the creative power of science. But this vision collided with the manifestly destructive power of science in the Spanish Civil War. The Basque city of Guernica was obliterated by bombing in the weeks preceding the opening of the expo, and this inspired Picasso's contribution to the Spanish pavilion. The world's fair of 1937 contained both imaginings of peace and depictions of war. This book explores the ways in which the visions of minor utopians are grounded in the here and now. This precludes detaching these visions from the prejudices, assumptions, and contradictory behavior of the individuals and social groups which produce them. Envisioning the future is frequently a way of trying to break with the past while unwittingly revealing the hold of the present on the way we think and live.

The second critical standpoint derives from the work of the historian Reinhart Koselleck. His interpretation of historical thinking creates a useful framework for the study of social visions in a time of collective violence. He posits a binary and asymmetrical relationship between what he terms the space of experience, or what appears to be the momentum of past events, and the horizon of expectations, or how we project that experience into the future. Experience is finite; expectations are infinite. There is an asymmetry, therefore, between what he terms the "past in the present" and the differently configured "future in the present"; the tension between the two generates our understanding of historical time.¹²

It may be useful to adapt this framework for our purposes. At certain moments, the link between past and future is fractured. War and other forms of collective violence destroy even the semblance of a link between the two. The space of experience is radically altered, and no one can predict the trajectory of future events. We can no longer see the antebellum horizon of expectations. The two world wars were among these radical disruptions; so were wars of decolonization, such as those in Algeria and Vietnam. So were civil wars and internal convulsions such as the ones which destroyed Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. So, it seems, was 9/11. Not all such events radically destabilize our sense of historical continuity. The resilience of some social groups or religious communities shields them at times from these ruptures. Others are not so fortunate. In some places and at some times of social turbulence or disturbance, a gap opens up between experience and expectations. In this domain, minor utopias emerge.

Many visionary projects arise in a period of collective violence. This pattern is evident throughout this book. The First World War led directly to the assertion of self-determination as a principle of what was intended to be a new international order, one that held the promise of outlawing war. The rise of fascism and the convulsions of the Spanish Civil War precipitated reflections whose traces are evident in the 1937 Paris expo. The Second World War and its crimes against humanity form the backdrop for the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is impossible to separate the events of 1968 from the convulsions surrounding the war in Algeria, which ended in 1964, and the war in Vietnam, about to enter its most deadly phase. And the viciousness of the civil war in the Balkans, genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda, and domestic repression in Latin America were at the center of many of the issues elaborated in the 1990s and after regarding crimes against humanity. The following chapters tell very different stories, but violence casts a shadow on each of them.¹³

Principles of Selection

Why have I chosen the years 1900, 1919, 1937, 1948, 1968, and 1992 to bracket the chapters of this book? Some dates are unavoidable: 1919 and 1968 are determined by political events of the first magnitude. But others are more arbitrary: 1937 was the eve of the Second World War, but the nations presenting displays of their national achievements in the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Métiers de la Vie Moderne in Paris in that year had other agendas. Their visions of the future contrasted bleakly with the harsh realities of the time. Similarly, the framing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 was so close to the liberation of the death camps of the Second World War that the document may appear to be an act of defiance more than an advance in international affairs. But the contradictory or counterintuitive character of these visions is part of their intrinsic interest. I have chosen 1992 rather than 1989 in part because the visions of global citizenship which emerged at the beginning of the 1990s so clearly echoed and transformed elements present in the celebration of globalization in the Paris expo of 1900 which we survey in the first chapter. In addition, the literature on the fall of the Soviet empire and the communist era is still too marked by Western triumphalism to permit a judicious account of that critical moment in twentieth-century history. Perhaps it would be wise to approach 1989 with the same hesitancy as Chou En-lai did when, in 1970, Henry Kissinger asked him what he thought of the French Revolution. Too soon to tell, was the response.

The six episodes I explore here tell neither an exclusive nor a comprehensive story. But together they deserve to be part of any considered history of the twentieth century. The first three chapters deal with visions of peace, based on the centrality of nation and social class; the latter three describe visions of liberation, some collective, some individual, based on the centrality of civil society and human rights. It is only by placing these visions alongside the history of catastrophe that we can get a fuller sense of the turbulence and the tragedy of the historical period—what Eric Hobsbawm has felicitously termed “the age of extremes”—in which we live.¹⁴ If Oscar Wilde were alive today,

perhaps he would have offered a slight variation on one of his aphorisms: “A map of the world that does not include [minor] utopias is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail.”¹⁵

1 1900

The Face of Humanity and Visions of Peace

In 1900, the most compelling question writers, artists, politicians, and other thoughtful people addressed was, what would the new century bring? We, in our more cynical times, might be surprised at how positive such conjectures were.¹ To be sure, there were prophets of doom, like H. G. Wells, who conjured up a technological nightmare of a *War of the Worlds* in 1898.² The Polish-born novelist Joseph Conrad also brought a pessimist's gaze to the future of the European project in his *Heart of Darkness*, published first in serialized form in 1899. But these voices were in the minority. In many public displays and private meditations, most imaginings of the twentieth century celebrated progress on the global scale and projected it optimistically into the foreseeable future. The key to their varied futures was peace.

I will consider three such visions of peace in this chapter. The first was the project of the Parisian banker, Albert Kahn, to photograph the whole world, and to preserve it in Paris for all to see as an Archive of the Planet. This initiative was more than one man's crusade. Kahn was one of many who mobilized photography in order to show the overwhelming affinities between countries and cultures ostensibly hostile to each other. War from this point of view was an unnecessary and damaging family quarrel. The second is the cornucopia presented in the great world's fair of 1900 in Paris, a glittering visual encomium to European ingenuity and its spread through education and commerce to every corner of the globe. The liberal nineteenth-century message was clear: out of trade came a peaceful and beneficent future. War was bad for commerce, as generations of bankers and businessmen tirelessly affirmed. The third vision is that of the socialist Second International, and in particular that of its leader, Jean Jaurès. His quest for social justice and peace described a very different perspective from that of the organizers of the Paris expo or of Kahn's *Archives de la planète*. To Jaurès, peace would emerge when the voice of working people entered the conversation about international conflict. When they would gain the right to speak, they would expose war as a capitalist cabal, and force politicians to defend the well-being of the many rather than the interests of the few.

All three of these visions of the twentieth century were global in scale. Those who live at the beginning of the twenty-first century should pause before claiming globalization as a recent or unprecedented phenomenon. Who in 1900 could miss the framing of the world by imperial powers, armed with the latest technology?³ The decade from 1895 to 1905 was marked by armed conflict in every continent. In 1895, Japan defeated China. Following her defeat, China was powerless to stop the informal dismemberment of the empire by Western interests representing Austria, France, Germany, Britain, Japan, and Russia. Then the United States joined in following the suppression of a violent nationalist revolt known as the Boxer Rebellion. It was put down with a special ferocity. "Bear yourselves like the Huns of Attila," was the instruction

Kaiser Wilhelm II gave his troops en route to China. They did so, killing, according to some estimates, over 100,000 Chinese in reprisals.

In 1896, perhaps 300,000 Armenians were massacred in the Ottoman Empire, as a result of the direct orders of Sultan Abdul Hamid, whose troops were engaged in war with Greece a year later. Between 1898 and 1903, as many as 100,000 people were killed in civil war in Colombia. In 1898, American forces seized the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Guam during hostilities with Spain. The United States then annexed Hawaii. Between 1899 and 1902 the British army fought a difficult guerrilla war to overcome a smaller band of Boer settlers in South Africa. The British ultimately succeeded but did so in part by attacking civilians; Boer families were incarcerated in what were termed “concentration camps,” rife with disease. An uprising known as the Herero revolt by several Bantu-speaking tribes in German West Africa was quelled by German troops in 1904–6. Estimates vary, but it is possible that 80 percent of the Herero population was killed in the conflict. In February 1904, the Japanese attacked the Russian navy at Port Arthur in China; the Japanese forces prevailed in subsequent fighting, establishing Japan as a world power.

It is against the backdrop of worldwide violence that the dreams of peace and of a harmonious new century we examine in this chapter must be set. All three of the visions prophesied peace; all three underestimated the extent to which imperial competition and conflict confounded their prophesies and made war and mass violence, not peace, the dominant feature of twentieth-century history.

Albert Kahn and the Face of Humanity

Before 1914 transformed both the landscape of the planet and the language we use to understand it, pacifism was an international force. On 4 September 1900, the first Hague Convention on the peaceful resolution of international conflicts entered into force. Throughout the world, many groups declared their wholehearted commitment to the idea that war could be done away with, that it could be made into an

anachronism. One man who shared this dream, this hypothesis about the possibility of limiting recourse to violence in international affairs, was the French banker Albert Kahn.

Kahn was a self-made man. He was an Alsatian Jew, born in 1860, when the two eastern provinces of France were under German rule. At age 16 he decided to seek his fortune in Paris. He was a shy man, something of a recluse, who remained a bachelor throughout his life. In the French capital he found employment as an apprentice in the banking house of a family friend. His work for the private bank of Eduard Goudchaux occupied him by day; by night, he studied philosophy. His tutor, Henri Bergson, was Jewish, too, and just a year older. Their friendship lasted long after both became famous, Kahn in the world of international finance, and Bergson in the field of philosophy. Bergson was the first Jew elected to the Académie Française. Both had a vision of the transformative power of knowledge. Their common interests and aspirations, shared in conversation over 60 years, marked a profound friendship.⁴

The two facets of his interest—finance and philosophy—fused in the field of international banking. His breakthrough came when he went to South Africa to help secure options for gold and diamond mining. Financing the De Beers and Rhodes operations was a gamble that paid off and handsomely. In 1897, at the age of 37, he became a partner in the bank.

South African interests were only the beginning of Kahn's work in international banking. After the turn of the century his attention turned to Japan. There he found a second home, and worked both as financier and as economic adviser in the Imperial Court. Here, too, he made friendships that lasted throughout the following turbulent decades.

It is in this period of phenomenally successful business activity, and the accumulation of a fortune in its wake, that Kahn apparently conceived of his life's work. His aim was to stay in the shadows, discreetly but firmly acting as the *éminence grise* behind a host of initiatives in the cause of world peace.⁵ Was it the vision of economic growth in South Africa and Japan that led him to see the need to link prosperity

to perpetual peace? (For without peace, Kahn believed, economic development was meaningless.) Was it the racial exploitation behind the hugely profitable extractive industries in the Cape, or the bloodshed of the Russo-Japanese war, that led him to fear for the future if productive forces were not harnessed to peaceful ends? Or, perhaps, did he suffer a *crise de conscience* in the 1890s, which led him to reconsider his beliefs and his mission in life?⁶ We will never know for sure, since this intensely private man left little correspondence to posterity. But his fleeting comments, dictated after his economic ruin in the stock market crash of 1929, disclose a man with a mystical turn of mind. “I am convinced there is a pattern to history, a pathway leading from narrow particularism to universality,” he wrote in one of his reveries.⁷ He had a metaphysician’s temperament, a taste for philosophical speculation about the quest for peace to which he returned throughout his later life. Kahn committed his fortune to educating people who lived in confined national frameworks to see the challenges and dangers of a world much more unified than ever before.⁸

From a small town in Alsace to Paris to Capetown to Tokyo: the trajectory Albert Kahn followed at the turn of the century was truly global. Once established in the world of international banking, Kahn saw the need to break down the insularity of European attitudes about the non-European world. To this end he began to sponsor a number of ventures to send young men and women on voyages of discovery. In 1898 he set up a scholarship program titled “Bourses de voyage autour du monde” (Scholarships for Trips Around the World). This was intended to widen the horizons of young men (and, later, young women) who had passed the *Agrégation*, the entrance exam into the field of university teaching, and who were *professeurs* at *lycées*, elite high schools, throughout France. Many would go on to careers in scholarship, politics, or public administration.

This benefaction, given to the University of Paris, and administered by the *Ecole normale supérieure*, came four years before the establishment of Cecil Rhodes’s scholarships at Oxford. Both are the gifts of men whose fortunes came out of South African mining; both had a sense

that great wealth carried the responsibility of using it to benefit the world. Both had a mystical element in their outlook. And both funded elite programs, aimed at the creation of an internationally minded group of future leaders. But consider the central difference. Rhodes wanted to bring young men from areas of white settlement (and from Germany) to what he saw as the “seat” of civilization, Oxford, whereas Kahn wanted to send his *boursiers* away from Paris. They were to be citizens of the world, not future proconsuls of an empire.⁹

Kahn made his views clear in the note he sent to the rector of the University of Paris setting up the scheme. Kahn believed firmly in meritocratic democracy; those who passed the Agrégation were selected not on social criteria but solely on intellectual merit. And yet, what Kahn feared was that those trained to teach the next generation would do so “without contact with life.” This personal, direct engagement was the aim of the scholarships, funding those who

would see that their interests should be directed towards the benefit of humanity as a whole. For this they need more than abstract knowledge, but contact with the world. This contact will show the variety of experience and contradict simple formulae about the world.

We have to find a way to take note of the exact role the diverse nations play on the face of the globe, we need to determine their diverse aspirations, see where they lead, if they tend towards violent shocks or if they can be reconciled. Abstract discussion can only provide possibilities and probabilities, a contact with the world provides firm, vibrant, and communicable impressions.

Thus a small group of highly talented and well-educated people—the future “intellectual and moral elite of the nation,” but who were “not old enough to have fixed ideas”—would come “to see with their eyes the different faces of the world over 15 months.” They would thereby learn “something about social life in diverse parts of the world, how governments form public spirit, the means used to develop the genius of each nation, and how in particular domains, particular groups realize their potential.”¹⁰

In its first two years, this program provided 15 scholarships of 15,000 francs each. The candidates had to have a clean bill of health and a

working knowledge of English. They could choose different itineraries, but the preferred one was the following: Paris, London, Liverpool, Marseilles, Athens, Constantinople, Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, Ceylon, India, Burma, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Hong Kong, China, Japan, United States, Germany, Russia—Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Odessa—then Budapest, Vienna, and back to Paris, all in 15 months. They had to travel alone or in groups of two, and keep in contact with both French consulates and the Ecole normale supérieure.¹¹

Eight years later, the program yielded a society—the “Cercle autour du monde,” in which young people, fresh from their exploration of what Henri Bergson termed “the great book of the world,” and distinguished older men and women would meet for conversation and, for the young, inspiration.¹² “I have antennae,” Kahn noted, “I study events and then find personalities called to higher destinies.”¹³ Among the notables addressing this society of internationalists were the sculptor Auguste Rodin, the Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, the Spanish man of letters Miguel de Unamuno, the British imperial writer Rudyard Kipling, the French socialist leader Jean Jaurès, and the future president of the French Republic Raymond Poincaré. A second center for such cosmopolitan encounters was opened in Tokyo in 1906.¹⁴

Kahn’s belief in meritocracy did not diminish the inherent elitism of this project, which fitted perfectly into both the Third Republic and the velvet-gloved world of pre-1914 international diplomacy. To find those who mattered, and to convince them to see the world beyond the confines of their national and intellectual boundaries, Kahn sponsored a range of initiatives. Perhaps the most daring of them all was photographic and cinematographic in character. He called it “Les Archives de la planète” (Archives of the Planet).¹⁵

Kahn’s archive was a collection of photographic and cinematographic images of many parts of the world. It is enormous, encompassing 75,000 still photographs and over 450 kilometers of film. In its entirety it provided a way of visualizing the world as a whole. It is important to highlight the Victorian pacifist core of this project, and its

affinities with other liberal visions. Here I speak of a European variant of British liberalism, the liberalism of Victorian parliamentarians like Richard Cobden and John Bright, men who were persuaded that free trade was the fundamental source of the amity of nations. The more trade, the less likelihood that an increasingly interdependent world would destroy itself: such was the faith of several generations of free trade pacifists.

Kahn was one of them, but he added a darker note of skepticism and anxiety. Kahn was in Paris during the great expo of 1900, which I shall describe later in this chapter. Along with millions of others, he saw the new and varied machinery of progress which were on spectacular display. But Kahn knew as well that these engines of construction and creativity could all too easily become engines of destruction and disaster. Kahn was firmly convinced that knowledge of the world would place constraints on the exercise of power in it. To this end, he was prepared to devote his fortune to a unique kind of *Exposition universelle*.

This one would be fixed—in his estate on the outskirts of Paris. His collection of images would have a permanent home. In the mansion and gardens Kahn created and occupied in Boulogne-Billancourt, a suburb of Paris, from 1894, they would be displayed to all comers. There anyone could make a visual journey around the world.

Kahn believed that the collection and analysis of images was a matter of great importance for philosophy and for the emerging social sciences, in particular for geography. To see is to know, he believed, and to know is to better predict the future. This essentially positivist creed took on many different forms, but one was through the study of geography. This was an entirely Republican choice. Fashion had it that the political right in France sent its sons to study the classics; the left preferred geography, and through the study of the environment and of everyday life this led to an appreciation, a celebration of the people of France, the citizens of *la France profonde*.

The origins of the project lie in discussions between Kahn and his erstwhile tutor, Henri Bergson.¹⁶ From 1900, he held a chair in the prestigious Collège de France, and in 1907 he published his most widely

read book in moral philosophy, *Creative Evolution*. He would go on to win a Nobel Prize for Literature. At the time the Archives de la planète were launched, he was already a public figure, a symbol of the way the study of philosophy and the search for tolerance were one. Here Bergson and Kahn were entirely in agreement. There is a mixture of the very particular and the completely universal in their vision, and the Archives de la planète became a kind of visualization of the assimilated Jewish outlook both men shared. No longer shackled by the constraints of orthodox belief, they still held firmly to the ethical core of the message of the prophets. On one occasion Kahn stated firmly, “Je suis juif, profondément juif” (I am Jewish, profoundly Jewish).¹⁷ His beliefs were probably closer to Theism than to Judaism, conventionally conceived, but such distinctions were of no interest to Kahn. What mattered was the cause. The activity of promoting peace was essential to this prophetic mission.¹⁸

Kahn, the active banker, could not possibly oversee the project himself. Instead he wanted to find a scholar to direct the project, a man who would share his vision and create “a sort of photographic inventory of the surface of the globe occupied and domesticated by man, as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century.”¹⁹ The director would have all the photographic tools and expertise he required “to fix once and for all, those aspects, practices and modes of human activity, the fatal disappearance of which is only a matter of time.” A house in Boulogne-Billancourt would be at his disposal, as would a professorship at the Collège de France, where Henri Bergson taught. Kahn donated the princely sum of 300 million francs to endow the chair (equivalent to approximately 800 million euros today [2006]).²⁰

Who could resist such an offer? The man Kahn found was Jean Brunhes, a young geographer teaching at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Brunhes was a native of Toulouse in the south of France. He was nine years younger than Kahn. A follower of the great French geographer Vidal de la Blache, Brunhes developed a humanistic approach to geography and later held the chair of geography at his university. His approach blended a religious vision, Christian ethics, and

scientific methodology.²¹ His aim was to trace systematically and scientifically what he termed the “physiognomy” of the world. This human metaphor was intentional. It was his view that the relationship between human society and the environment was reciprocal and dialectical: each transformed the other. To describe and analyze that process of adaptation and change was the work of the human geographer.

By the end of the nineteenth century, this task took on a new dimension. As a direct result of the revolution in transportation, the world was now enclosed. Men had reached, in Brunhes’s phrase, “the limits of their cage.” Interdependency was now unavoidable.²² Photography was an essential tool of this kind of geographical study. Film and color photography could “fix” some semblance of accuracy in our image of ordinary life. Of special interest were those isolated communities even then being sucked into the globalized world; their features had to be captured before they were gone forever. Through these means, the human geographer could trace what Brunhes called the “general physiognomy of the town and house,” and move from these forms of “natural vegetation” to the street, the town, the city, and the metropolis. This bird’s-eye view of the human ecology was to be complemented by snapshots of individual inhabitants.²³

Here the visions of Brunhes and Kahn merged. The impulse to present the face of humanity was essential both to the scientific study of geography and to the humanitarian quest for world peace. Here was a kind of proto-ecological consciousness, one in which a belief in universality came down to a notion that we are all inhabitants of one planet and share its bounty and its hazards, whatever ideologists may say about national differences. Out of this *mélange* of nineteenth-century positivism and pacifism *Les archives de la planète* was born.

Over the next 18 years, until his death in 1930, Brunhes directed a complex team of photographers and cinematographers. Working closely with the French film pioneer Léon Gaumont, they amassed thousands of color plates taken in 50 countries.²⁴ The amount of film footage that these pioneering cameramen generated was immense. These films were shown to invited audiences at Boulogne-Billancourt

and annually in the Grand Amphitheater of the Sorbonne, with the President of the Republic in the audience. In 1914, Kaiser Wilhelm II had a private viewing.²⁵ The range of these images is stunning; no corner of the world is ignored. What they show is a traditional world on the edge of modernization, a world about to disappear but one in which men and women live lives not particularly different from the ones Kahn's countrymen led in France.

This mobilization of the image bore the unmistakable imprint of the pacifist's message. Kahn's view was that the encounter between the photographer and the subject was a human one, establishing a silent dialogue between the two. The person or group photographed were not objectified, or treated as species or oddities; instead they were imprinted with the same humanity as those who would come to see their image in future years. There is no indication he doubted these naive assumptions or modified them in light of the extensive correspondence sent back by photographers to Brunhes and Kahn during these photographic expeditions. These letters were full of the daily business of photography, its difficulties and conflicts and, occasionally, its pleasures.²⁶

"The aim of the Archives of the Planet," Brunhes wrote in 1913, "is to establish a dossier of humanity seen in the midst of life, and at a unique moment, when we are witnessing a kind of 'moulting,' an economic, geographic and historic transformation of unprecedented proportions."²⁷ Here was the urgency of the task: a world of disparate social practices was being transformed. In the process much would be irretrievably lost. A vanishing world needed its chroniclers, and Kahn and Brunhes intended to ensure that at least a record would remain.

We can see clearly the mixed character of the project. There was a sadness, a wistful hurry to make a record of a world coming apart. In 1912 Kahn wrote that the Archives would record "aspects, practices, and modes of human activity the fatal disappearance of which is but a question of time." But there was also a conviction that the young needed

to appreciate the very diversity and complexity of that world, dying and being born again, in order to avoid succumbing to forces tearing it apart. Only through facing humanity could war be averted. Kahn the banker knew all about the need to foresee the future in the financial world; his archive was an attempt to enable the coming generations to do so in the field of human affairs tout court.

Kahn's project stood at the intersection of ethnography, cinematography, and international affairs at a moment when the term "globalization" began to take on the form we know today. The world was beginning to share a common market in labor, in capital, and in the exchange of goods. The reach of the market was worldwide; that is why the photographers had to reach Mongolia and Japan.

Kahn's agenda was twofold: to capture what was new in the world, and to record what was in the process of vanishing. Industrialized sites jostle in the Kahn collection with images of Mongolian steppe life. The very new and the very old are both vividly captured. So are facets of the history of decolonization. In the interwar years, Kahn's photographers reached Africa. Some of his photographers, particularly in Dahomey, handed their cameras to the locals; others stayed resolutely behind the lens. Kahn's was a kind of League of Nations mandate of *l'imaginaire*, pointing toward the end of Western rule and the end of the time when Europeans photographed Africans and Asians as we photograph animals in a zoo today.

Once again the dialectic of new and old is apparent. Motion picture technology became an agent of nostalgia by documenting the disappearance of old ways as much as the emergence of new nations. What Kahn sponsored was a world's fair of images and sounds, not celebrated in the imperial heartland, but captured where they were, in Asia, Africa, the Middle East.

In these varied projects, Kahn aimed to promote international understanding among the young who would some day play central roles in world affairs. In the Kahn estate in Boulogne-Billancourt, his photo-

graphs and films would be preserved. Adjacent to the Archives de la planète, the young scholars who had benefited from the Bourse autour du monde would gather and tell of their encounters with the farthest reaches of the globe. There they would meet other prominent intellectuals, writers, scientists. Before 1914 the poet Charles Péguy, Catholic and socialist, was one of the people who made the pilgrimage to Boulogne-Billancourt. Kahn would take an active interest in promoting his work. Albert Einstein and Marie Curie were there, too. All shared a vision of the potential for a peaceful future and the fear that such a future would be torn up in a paroxysm of international conflict.

Later, after the Great War, and before the even worse slaughter of the Second World War, Kahn wrote of the transformation of war that had occurred in his lifetime. War had no function in the twentieth century other than “immediate, universal, reciprocal, and unlimited destruction.” An idealist until the end, this horrifying prospect meant, to Kahn, that war had become an “impossibility.”²⁸ He retained this belief even when it was apparent that war was on the way. In this respect he was a typical French intellectual, persuaded that war could not happen, and that it was just around the corner.

The use of photography in the pacifist cause helps us locate Kahn’s imagination at the divide of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Photography had captured the attention of many intellectuals and men of affairs before 1900 but had many new uses and unlimited possibilities in the era of newsreels and moving pictures. It was the “high-tech” art of the day, filled with an unresolved mixture of the playful, the “realistic,” and the dishonest.²⁹

It is not at all surprising that a practical man like Kahn was drawn to photography. So was Etienne Clémentel, who, during the Great War, used to escape from boring Cabinet meetings to what is now the Musée Rodin to experiment with photographic techniques. So were many others. But what distinguishes Kahn’s mind is how he decided to use photography.

Epilogue

Let us leave the Kahn of 1900 and follow his life in subsequent decades. For his mind remained resolutely that of a fin de siècle visionary until his death in 1940. In later years, Kahn's personal philanthropy took on a number of other forms. He created an international garden in his house in the suburbs of Paris, a Center of Social Documentation, a National Committee for Social and Political Studies, an Institute of Public Health in Strasbourg, alongside the Chair in human geography he endowed in the Collège de France. But at the heart of the project was the image, or rather the galaxy of images collected between 1909 and the collapse of his financial empire in 1931.³⁰

The imagery of an enduring and shared humanity is what Kahn was after, but the pace of change in the period in which his emissaries operated was so great that *la longue durée* was disturbed time and again by fundamental upheavals. Not the least of these was the Great War itself. Kahn was a recorder of the timeless, but the effects of early globalization and the world war presented much else to the gaze of the traveler and the *cinéaste*. There are impressive images in the Kahn collection of Paris at war: here it is patriotism, not pacifism, which is triumphant.³¹ And Kahn's patriotism was not in doubt. Germany at war represented everything he loathed; and like so many Frenchmen, he identified the cause of his nation with the cause of humanity as a whole.

In 1917, Kahn drafted a long disquisition on the rights and duties of government. This document is a plea for a Kantian world federation. "Mankind had to pass through a calamity in order to see reality," Kahn wrote. Germany had shown one path to the future: that of "the negation of morality and justice." Now it was time to forge another one, since "humanity has no rational organism to direct it, and no certain light to orient it. Security comes out of finding both." Only a league of nations, he believed, with a Federal military force to back up Federal decisions, could prevent the descent into barbarism.³² I will discuss this vision, braided together with that of Woodrow Wilson, in chapter 2.

Kahn the banker dealt with anticipating the future of financial and other markets; that was his metier. Was it possible to anticipate the

future of human societies? Within boundaries, yes, since what we could see and understand was the basis of any sound projection into the future.³³ Here his approach to knowledge dovetailed well with the work of the League of Nations, in particular its International Labour Office, headed by Albert Thomas, a member of the *Société autour du monde*. There are clear echoes too in the later development of movements towards intellectual cooperation, leading after 1945 to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).³⁴

After 1918, Kahn's overall project, so redolent of nineteenth-century positivism³⁵—the search for knowledge, and out of knowledge, the search for universal laws—suffered the same fate as the League of Nations itself. It could not cope with the harsh climate of the interwar years. Kahn himself lost his fortune in the wake of the economic crisis following the stock market crash of 1929, and his projects either came to an end, as in the case of the *Archives de la planète*, or settled into the status of personal, and now public, archives rather than agencies of world change.³⁶

In one way, his story is that of a failure. All his projects for peace came to nothing. At the end of his life, Kahn was destitute. He had three personal possessions: a bed, a table, and a chair. His house and gardens were taken over by the city of Paris, which generously allowed him to remain as a lodger in his former domain. He died in 1940, two years before the Jews of Paris were deported.

The fate of his life's work shows how much of the pre-1914 world did not survive the aftermath of the world conflict. But not all was irretrievably crushed by warfare. Elements of his beliefs survive, albeit in different forms, to this day. At their core is the belief that the world is both one and horribly divided. Gazing at the common face of humanity can help unite it. The story of Kahn's vision invites us to ponder the fate of a vision of the future, a commitment to liberal humanitarianism, born in the nineteenth century, flourishing in 1900, and forced to weather the storms of a much harsher age.

There is a theme in Kahn's project to which I shall return in this book. It is this: how is it possible to visualize, to represent in images or

artifacts, a world qualitatively and palpably different from the one in which we live? This question recurred in the 1919 peace conference, in the 1937 international exhibition, and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, presented to the United Nations in 1948. Kahn believed in vision, in the power of sight and reflection to render a change in the way people think about themselves and others.

Here Kahn anticipated later experiments in visual pacifism. In the 1950s Edward Steichen's photographic exhibition, first shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and then published as *The Family of Man*, made the same urgent appeal, deepened by the cruelties of the second world war. The subtitle of the book said it all: Here was "an exhibition of creative photography, dedicated to the dignity of man, with examples from 68 countries, conceived and executed by Edward Steichen; assisted by Wayne Miller; installation designed by Paul Rudolph; prologue by Carl Sandburg."³⁷ Sandburg was the American poet par excellence, Lincoln's biographer. After the Second World War, Americans claimed to be the protectors of the dignity of man, configured in these classic photographs. Forty years earlier, Kahn and his associates did the same, though perhaps with more attention to the way the world was changing at dizzying speed than is evidenced in Steichen's landmark collection.

Kahn was a mystical banker, a visionary realist. He tried to record the face of humanity as it was, and to establish a direct link between peoples through the line of sight of the camera. In this way, Kahn's work expresses both the globalizing vision of turn-of-the-century pacifism and some of its inherent contradictions. By attempting to photograph the world, Kahn faced the central question as to the character of the European gaze when European imperialism was at its apogee. Were the people whose faces he wanted us to see specimens, exotic forms of life, or were they really our brothers and sisters? And if they were kin, what did we know of their gaze, of their angle of vision about these Europeans with their cameras, their notebooks, and their grand plans? The answer is very little, or nothing at all.

Kahn the banker, Kahn the financier of South African mining ven-

tures and Japanese munitions, was not a neutral observer, nor were his emissaries. His vision was compromised at least as much by what he did as by what he said. What his project shows us, then, are the contradictions in the outlook of a liberal visionary in 1900. His hope to banish war may have been naive; it certainly bore all the traces of an elitist view that the best and most educated members of a society could bring peace to the masses. His deployment of photography as a weapon in the pacifist armory was striking, and has lost none of its power. To see the family of man was sufficient, from his point of view, to persuade observers of the absurdity of armed conflict.

The Imperial Vision: Exposition Universelle

Albert Kahn's project of visualizing the world has a very "1900" feel about it. One reason is the affinities between his project and that of the greatest world's fair of them all, the Exposition universelle of 1900 in Paris. Following a long tradition of spectacular displays of national economic power, the organizers of this world's fair intended to project a vision of the future, one based on the nineteenth-century liberal belief that the more international commerce there was, the less international conflict there would be. Here is a liberal solution to the problem of war, one which had the virtue of marrying profit to what was termed "pacifism," or the pursuit of amity among nations.

In whose interests was the world's fair of 1900 built? Firstly, it was built in the interest of individual nations, displaying their wares, their ingenuity, their creativity, their peaceful commercial life; secondly, in the interest of multinational or national firms, able to outshine the competition; thirdly, in the interests of the 40 million people drawn to a spectacle purporting to tell them what the future would be like. All this is true, and yet incomplete. The organizers of the world's fair of 1900 had a pacifist message in mind. What they offered was a blueprint for peaceful competition, a kind of commercial Olympics, which had been revived merely four years before. The organizers of the expo decorated Paris to visualize the essential link between the expansion of capitalism

and the peaceful future of the world. Their expo performed this message; they did not have to lecture, or persuade; instead they could attract, impress, and dazzle the millions who came to see it.

The impresario of this cultural and commercial extravaganza was Alfred Picard, one of the *hauts fonctionnaires* of the French Third Republic. A graduate of the Ecole polytechnique, the elite college for those destined to run the country, Picard combined a technical knowledge of construction and organization with a skillful facility to orchestrate press and parliament while using his administrator's status to shield himself and his projects from direct political criticism. His hand was evident in every part of the preparation of this massive event, and his efforts yielded an efficient blend of political propaganda, business promotion, and public edification.³⁸

The imagery of the world exhibition was a veritable inventory of advertisements for a world order which was stridently commercial, Eurocentric, and unashamedly imperialist. What the designers of the exposition offered for sale was "progress," understood as the materialization and expansion of European power in a cornucopia of goods.

As we shall see, there were other ways of configuring European "progress," and some people saw imperial power in very different ways. There was an undercurrent of doubt at the great expo, for instance, in some French commentary on the German pavilion, but it remained just that—a subterranean stream of concern about relative power and an air of mutual scrutiny among the Great Powers now heavily armed with the fruits of industrialization. Still, the overall mood was ebullient. And why not? Europeans in 1900 looked on their "high tech" with the same insouciance as we do today when using electronic communication or commerce. The grand Exposition universelle in Paris, which opened 14 April 1900, was a kind of "World Wide Web" of the beginning of the twentieth century.

The organizers of the expo left enduring marks on the city. The layout of the *exposition* described a giant letter A in the heart of Paris. One leg of the letter described a line that linked two new exhibition halls, which

remain landmarks in Paris today. They are the Grand Palais and the Petit Palais, and they form part of a new line of sight down the avenue Alexandre III, crossing the Seine River over a new bridge named after the czar, France's most powerful ally. Across the river the vista opened to the dome of Napoleon's Invalides, where both his bones and those of his old soldiers found a resting place.

The second leg of the giant A stressed power as well. It stretched from the large spaces adjacent to the Ecole militaire on the left bank of the Seine through the esplanade around the Eiffel Tower and then across the river to the Trocadéro. The industrial, military, and colonial exhibits were located along this line. Connecting the two legs of the A were a host of displays and exhibitions along both banks of the Seine. Further exhibitions of a more rural character were housed east of Paris in the Vincennes Park.³⁹

Product obliterated process in the Parisian expo. In the Trocadéro gardens descending to the river, visitors surveyed the bounty of imperial expansion stripped of even the hint of the struggle that went on to achieve it. As the novelist Paul Morand put it: "All that survived of our many Colonial expeditions—often so disastrous—was the enchantment of mosques and minarets, the medley of all the strange races on earth, conquered and subjected to the laws of the white man."⁴⁰

The same was true of other European exhibitions. German goods jostled with French ones, less than 30 years after the Prussian army had encircled Paris and in 1871 created, on the grounds of Versailles, the new imperial German state. Thirty years later, not a trace of these convulsions remained in central Paris, where the pavilions sprang up like mushrooms. The fantastic forms of art nouveau architecture and design formed palaces of the imagination, where war was abolished, where poverty was invisible, where strikes and social conflict never happened, and where social hierarchies, like imperial ones, were turned into God-given facts of life.

The slogan of the exhibition was retrospective: Picard and his huge staff self-consciously framed it as "Le bilan d'un siècle" (the balance sheet of a century). But the thrust of this project was clearly prospective,

suggesting to its huge population of visitors what the twentieth century was likely to become. Between April and November 1900, some 50 million people attended. Half of all the displays were French. Aside from Metropolitan France and Algeria, French colonies and protectorates were represented. There were displays on the French Congo, Ivory Coast, Dahomey, Guadeloupe, French Guinea, Guyana, Indochina, Madagascar, Martinique, Mayotte and the Comoros Islands, New Caledonia, Oceania, Reunion, St. Pierre and Miquelon, Senegal, French Somalia, Sudan, and Tunisia. In every one a version of colonial life, orderly, unpolitical, deeply indebted to the noble colonizers, sanitized in every respect, was there for visitors to see.

Twenty-four European nations participated, as did four African states—Liberia, Morocco, the Republic of South Africa, and the Orange Free State. China, Korea, Japan, Persia, and Siam represented Asia. From the Americas came Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, El Salvador, and the United States. Bolivia, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic were invited, but were unable to mount national displays.

With the costs borne primarily by the exhibiting states, architects submitted their designs to a central French committee. Their approval was necessary before construction could begin on national pavilions. For a year, Paris was turned into a building site. Peacefully and colorfully, the East of Europe invaded the West, at least in the representation of different national cultures. The pavilion of Serbia, staffed by 408 people, was a “Serbo-Byzantine” mansion, in which visitors were invited to view exhibitions of wine, food products, and silk, including a display of silk-worm cocoons. The pavilion of Italy, serviced by over 3000 people, similarly pointed to the East. Its design was Venetian Gothic, combining details of the Doge’s Palace and the Basilica of San Marco. The nine Russian pavilions, manned by over 3000, included a pavilion of Asiatic Russia in the form of a Kremlin, perhaps as a reminder of Napoleon’s defeat in Russia 78 years before.

The imperial presence was everywhere. The Portuguese presented a colonial palace; three Dutch pavilions included a Buddhist cloister and two edifices representing the Dutch East Indies. The British had a

colonial palace, an Indian palace, and a display of Canadian agriculture, alongside a wide array of displays of domestic industrial and commercial power. A set of colonial displays provided information on the process of colonization, on colonial materials and products.

The exotic character of the colonial project was evident throughout the *Exposition*. Here is a description of the Madagascar pavilion, a circular edifice 55 meters in diameter. Displays covered 2.6 kilometers: “On the ground floor there was a wooden island, on which in a decor of rocks and shrubs, unfolded the panorama of a forest in Madagascar, whose flora and fauna were present within the limits of the Parisian climate. Monkeys played on the rocks; ducks swam alongside different kinds of indigenous boats.” Above were displays of zoological, ethnographic, and commercial interest, as well as a diorama describing the position of French troops in the act of taking Tananarive on 30 September 1895.⁴¹ A snack bar was manned by natives from Martinique, offering to visitors to the pavilion of “anciennes colonies” a taste of local produce.⁴²

Fully one quarter of the colonial exhibition was devoted to Indochina. A Cambodian temple, surmounted by a royal pagoda, rose 47 meters above the ground; it introduced visitors to the splendors of the recently discovered temple complex at Angkor. The pagoda was approached by a cascade of steps decorated by ceremonial stone dragons and Cambodian guards. To its left was a Vietnamese household and a Cambodian theater.⁴³ The pavilion of Sénégal and Sudan echoed to the sounds of the Senegalese Cora.

The novelist Paul Morand captured the flavor of this imperial *tour du monde*. “Paris is given over to Negroes,” he remarked,

to Breton bag-pipe players, to Yellow eaters of raw fish. The world revolves so fast that one is dizzy, passing from surprise to surprise . . . caught in a network of mythical evocations and impossible monuments, whirled in a maelstrom of progress, held in the clutches of new alliances, amidst a cacophony of weird diphthongs and incomprehensible words.

I passed my days at that Arab, negro, Polynesian, town, which stretched from the Eiffel Tower to Passy, a quiet Paris hillside suddenly bearing on its back all Africa, Asia, an immense space of which I dream . . . a Tunisian bazaar where you smoke the *narghileh* and watch the dancers, the stereorama,

the Kasbah, the white minarets, surprised to find themselves reflected in the Seine, the stuffed African animals, the pavilion of Indo-China varnished with red gum, its golden dragons and its carving painted by Annamites in black robes and its golden dragons . . . The Tonkinese village nestled with its junks and its women chewing betel. [At] a Dahomey village . . . great negroes, still savages, strode barefoot with proud and rhythmic bearing, the subjects of ancient kings, old and recent enemies. . . . All this hillside exhaled perfumed incense, vanilla, and the smoke of pastilles that burned in seraglios, there you heard the scraping of Chinese violins, the click of castanets, the thin wail of Arab flutes, the mystic sadness of the Aissous.⁴⁴

This mélange of stereotypes fits in perfectly with what we now call Orientalism, a prism of the imagination, producing distortions of a kind both denigrating to the other and flattering to the European. Contemplating the weak, the decadent, the sexually depraved “East” helped many in the “West” to glory in its strength, its progress, its civilization.⁴⁵

And yet the gaze was not (and never is) one way. The exotic face of empire stared back at the Europeans who came to the Exposition universelle. We can only conjecture about what these Africans and Asians made of it all. The Pavilion of the French Ministry of Colonies celebrated all the key figures of French colonial expansion, including 50 busts of contemporary explorers, administrators, men of the army and navy, all displayed in the Hall of the Geographic Service of the Colonies. A sculpture of a French explorer benignly raising an African from his proximity to the beasts of the forest, and pointing to the sky, encapsulated the self-deceptions of the age.⁴⁶

This was the common currency of colonial officials and their “auxiliaries,” whose work was celebrated too in the Exposition universelle. There were many participants in *la mission civilisatrice*. “One of the most characteristic features of the progress of the colonial idea in France,” the organizers proclaimed, “is the considerable and rapid development over the last ten years of private societies of propaganda, geography and scientific research which brings to French colonization a spirit of active and disinterested collaboration.”⁴⁷ As in Britain, measuring the world was part and parcel of controlling and exploiting it.⁴⁸

There were many other thematic pavilions too, in which international exchange and cooperation were the leitmotifs. Some were industrial; other pavilions were dedicated to celebrating the growth of what we now call social capital and social policy. Alongside parks presenting wonders of motorized transport, or of electricity—where the word “television” was coined—or of civil engineering, mines and metallurgy, were displays on education.⁴⁹ The Berlitz language school had a booth, as did the *Alliance française*, the Alpine club, the big Paris department stores, Bon Marché and Printemps, and the Louvre. The commercial dimension of this world’s fair was hard to miss. Those with purchasing power had a cornucopia of things to buy: consumption could run riot in such an atmosphere, and that, to be sure, was precisely the point.

Power of a more martial kind was on display as well. Anyone who wanted to find out about armaments and artillery could do so; torpedoes, maps, naval instruments, and forms of military hygiene were there for the curious. The big armaments firms were in attendance: the British Vickers and Maxim; the American gun manufacturers Smith & Wesson, and the German Krupp, though its display was limited to its enlightened program of workers’ welfare.⁵⁰

The overall effect was dazzling. What could Europe not do in the future? What could Europeans not produce and sell in the future? As Rosalind Williams has argued, at the Exposition universelle, dreams and commerce became one.⁵¹ And as in most advertising campaigns, what was left out, what was obscured about the “product” mattered at least as much as what was seen. One Catholic critic put the point succinctly. Maurice Talmeyr was struck by the array of goods and colors presented in the pavilion of British India. What visitors saw was “an India-warehouse, so magnificent and so partially true as it may be, is true only partially, so partially as to be false, and all these overflowing rooms . . . speak to me only of an incomplete and truncated India, that of the cashiers. For this land of enormous and sumptuous trade is equally that of a frightening local degeneracy, of a horrifying indigenous misery. A whole phantom-race dies there and suffers in famine. India is not only a warehouse, it is a cemetery.”⁵² Talmeyr put his finger on the central

conjuring trick of the Exposition universelle. It was a festival of science and learning, pointing to the pure and applied arts as benefactors of humanity, but it was also a palace of fantasies, most of which were on sale. Fantasies were turned into goods; as such, their commercial appeal relied on their liberation from anything sordid or even realistic.⁵³ Positive advertising appeared side by side with positivist instruction.

In the Paris expo, the brutality of imperial rule inside Europe and colonial rule outside of Europe was nowhere to be seen. Stripping away these self-serving myths of beneficence was the job of novelists, not curators. One of them was an obscure Polish-born novelist, Joseph Conrad, who in 1900–1 published two novels which exposed the moral ugliness of the European reach across the world. In *Lord Jim*, the impossibility of living according to a European code of honor is the subject of an extraordinary journey across the Indian Ocean into Sumatra. In *The Heart of Darkness*, published a year later, the sheer brutality of *la mission civilisatrice* in Africa was presented as an uneasy nightmare. En route to finding Kurtz, the man in charge, the central character, Marlowe, meets one of Kurtz's subordinates, the chief accountant of the firm collecting ivory in the Belgian Congo. "The cause entrusted to us by Europe," says the accountant, "was in the hands of this great man Kurtz: 'Oho, he will go far, very far,' he began again. 'He will be a somebody in the Administration before long. They, above—the Council in Europe, you know—mean him to be.'" Marlowe's view was the same: "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz; and by and by I learned that, most appropriately, the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted him with the making of a report, for its future guidance."⁵⁴ Kurtz would have been right at home at the Paris expo, which celebrated the world he served so brutally.

It is inappropriate to judge the Paris expo by the imperial and racial standards of the subsequent century. But those very standards were challenged within the expo itself. One such discordant note was struck in an exhibition on African-American life and culture. The American commissioners sponsored a display on Negro life in the United States. It was placed in the Palace of Social Economy, and its avowed purpose

was to show that the “race problem had been solved through political compromise.”⁵⁵ The vice-principal of the Tuskegee Institute, Thomas J. Calloway, was in charge and turned to the young black sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois to gather together the displays which would support this vision of racial peace.

Du Bois did nothing of the sort. He rejected what had been termed the “Atlanta compromise,” the view championed by Booker T. Washington, Calloway’s colleague at Tuskegee, that blacks should accept discrimination and work within segregation to achieve economic rather than political freedom. Instead, Du Bois put together an entirely different vision, one describing the world of middle-class black Americans as little different from white Americans or Europeans in their cultural and intellectual life. Black professionals were captured by a black photographer, Thomas J. Askew, in a series of arresting studies in dignity. By doing so, Askew and other black photographers, including Frances Benjamin Johnston, engaged in a powerful act of “subversive resistance” to the ideas of Calloway and Washington. As historian Shawn Smith has noted, “Contesting the colonialist and imperialist logics forwarded by living racial and ethnic displays, the American Negro exhibit disrupted the essentialized narratives that depicted people of color as the uncivilized infants of human evolution.”⁵⁶

Du Bois the sociologist deployed statistical material on black property ownership and displayed 200 of the roughly 1400 books written by black American authors. “We have thus,” he wrote, “an honest, straightforward exhibit of a small nation of people, picturing their life and development without apology, or gloss, and above all made by themselves.”⁵⁷ The word “nation” is the critical one; using it meant that America was not one nation under God, but two nations, a white one on top and a black one treated in ways which could not be squared with any sense of human dignity. These photographs showed the way to breaking the racial barrier; it could not be sustained on any rational grounds after gazing at the faces of the men and women displayed in Du Bois’s exhibit and viewing the evidence of black achievement in Atlanta, Georgia. What would the world look like if black men and

women were given the chance to break the bonds of racial prejudice? Here is the core of the book Du Bois published three years later, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which he prophesied that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”⁵⁸ In 1900 Atkins’s photographs and Du Bois’s exhibit sketched out a vision, one in which the color line was lifted to disclose the cultural and intellectual sophistication of black Americans.

This example of the use of photography to describe a common humanity is strikingly similar to the project of Albert Kahn. As we have noted above, it informed the hugely popular *Family of Man* exhibition of the photographs of Edward Steichen.⁵⁹ But 50 years earlier, what is striking is the jarring contradiction between the Du Bois exhibit, which won a gold prize in the Paris expo, and the triumphantly imperialist vision which surrounded it. There was a Cuban exhibit in the Trocadero palace, prepared by the American commissioners. It was covered with red, white, and blue bunting, suggesting that Cuba was halfway between a colony and an annexed part of the United States. There were displays on the civilizing mission of schools for native Americans.⁶⁰ The Paris expo offered sufficient space and opportunity for the expression of competing and entirely contradictory imaginings of race relations in the future. Whenever the nonwhite world was configured at the Paris expo, we can see the instability and contradiction of the vision the fair offered to its millions of visitors.

Not everyone found the fair to their liking. The painter Claude Monet hated it. He considered it such a “menagerie that I rushed off to see the apple orchards in blossom.”⁶¹ Henry Adams noted that, on going into the expo, he “entered a supersensual world, in which he could measure nothing except by chance collisions of movements”; it was a kind of “physics made stark mad by metaphysics.”⁶² The metaphysics was that of commerce and advertising, the world Walter Benjamin later described as dominated by the arts of mechanical reproduction.⁶³ Beneath the stated agenda of peace and progress, other, more material appeals were in evidence. Both gave to the Paris expo of 1900 its peculiar force and appeal.

Europe as a whole, Europe dominating the world, was on display, and a dazzling display it was. But it is easy to dismiss the logic of the enterprise as a simple commercial exercise. To do so is to read back into 1900 something which happened much later. Now world's fairs are advertising events, of little political consequence, and with no evident social agenda. Not so a century ago. Then the connection between commerce and peace was more evident. The claim was this: what possible use was war if the productive forces of the world's industrial powers could be harnessed to the well-being of the people of the world? War was a businessman's nightmare; in so far as it disrupted commerce, it introduced vast uncertainty, which is the enemy of finance, and tore up the fabric of international trade. While today these claims appear to be self-serving rhetoric, a century ago they made sense to a surprisingly large population. Liberal pacifism was a vision of its time, filled with contradictions, but a vision nonetheless.

Jean Jaurès and the Workers' Vision

So was socialist pacifism, drawn to the great Paris expo as was every other major social movement of the time. In this sense, Paris was indeed the capital of the nineteenth century, and of the beginning of the twentieth century, too.⁶⁴ The dreams of a peaceful and a bountiful future conjured up by a Parisian banker in Boulogne-Billancourt and by a host of architects, builders, and designers who created the pavilions of the Exposition universelle, were not the only visions of the future to emerge from the French capital. There was a third, distinctive way in which the twentieth century was imagined, far removed from the banker's world, and from that of the prefects, the industrialists, and the commercial magnates of the Exposition universelle. This vision focused on working men and women and on their grievances and their rights. This dream touched on peace and plenty, but focused as much—or even at times more—on justice and equality.

The People's Tribune

The tribune of the working people was not a Parisian, but his voice echoed throughout the city and indeed throughout the world. His name was Jean Jaurès, the leader not only of the French Socialist Party but of the social democratic movement which had spread from Europe to North and South America and beyond and which had created an international socialist organization—the Second International, founded in 1889—which was a kind of parliament of working-class organizations and a forum for the expression of working-class aspirations.

Between 1900 and 1914, Jean Jaurès did more than any other man or woman to create a third vision of the twentieth century, one based on the message of international working-class solidarity in the face of international tension and the threat of war. It is worthwhile broadening the chronological limits of this chapter to show how a third vision of 1900 developed in the years which followed.

Jaurès was a speaker without peer. His oratory embodied the moral vision behind the European socialist movement, a movement which had come into prominence by the last years of the nineteenth century.⁶⁵ Both Jaurès and the socialist project he espoused, indeed symbolized, came of age together in the 1890s. By then the French Republic had weathered its early unstable years, and the new German Empire had lifted its ban on working-class organizations. In the 1890s, a wave of labor militancy spread over Western Europe, announcing that working-class deference to their masters at work was on the wane.

This new spirit of revolt was evident in many villages and towns, including the mining town of Carmaux in southwest France. In 1892 the secretary of the miners' union, Jean-Baptiste Calvignac, was elected mayor. He asked his employers to give him two days off to fulfill his administrative obligations. They refused. To the miners, the refusal was a punitive reaction to Calvignac's socialist views; to the employers, it was because he would not do a full week's work. To defend their leader and their choice as mayor, on 16 August 1892 the 3,000 miners of Carmaux went on strike. The stalemate dragged on for two months until socialists in the Chamber of Deputies forced the mine owners to

accept arbitration. Calvignac was reinstated, and the striking workers went back to work.⁶⁶

The head of the family which owned the mines and much else besides, the Marquis de Solages, resigned from the Chamber of Deputies. In his place the people of Carmaux elected Jean Jaurès. A native of the region, born in 1859, he came from a family of professionals of some distinction. A brilliant student, he graduated from the elite liberal arts college of the Third Republic, the *Ecole normale supérieure*. He became a professor of philosophy and then turned to politics. He was a staunch defender of the Republic, but it was only during his period working with the miners of Carmaux that he crystallized his socialist position. He came to socialism in order to better defend the Republic.

Working people, in Carmaux as elsewhere, gave Jaurès a political education. The principles he espoused were common to many ardent Republicans who were not socialists. He believed in God as “the order and harmony of things,”⁶⁷ but favored separation of church and state. He was a patriot, devoted to national defense, but he favored a militia to defend the nation rather than a professional army dominated by a reactionary professional staff. To advance the active participation of the citizenry in the Republic, he fought to extend and develop a system of national education open to all. These were the views of the Republican center in France.⁶⁸

What made Jaurès turn left was his contact with working men and women in southwest France in the 1880s and 1890s. Through these friendships and exchanges came a commitment to defend political freedoms by rooting them in social equality. Local politics taught him much about national and international politics. A true Republic, Jaurès held, was unreachable while social divisions along class lines were so deep. He came to see that the political framework of a Republic committed to “liberty, equality, fraternity” was bound to be subverted by those who used it to defend property and privilege. And a system of states resting on class inequalities would inevitably clash in the field of imperial and international conflict. Both domestic and international peace were impossible, he came to see, under capitalism.

The vision Jaurès created was clearly utopian. It identified what was destructive in the current order by positing an entirely different one. Here he was not alone. A multitude of men and women in Europe and beyond imagined a world in which industry was in the hands of the many rather than the few, in which the fruits of production were shared so as to eradicate urban slums and rural hovels.

How would this come about? There were those who based their notion of social transformation primarily on the gathering together in trade unions and cooperative societies of working people. These men and women contested with employers at the point of production for control over the fruits of their labor. In France such people were called “syndicalists,” and they harbored a deep suspicion of anything tainted by “politics.” By that they meant the struggle for control of the instruments of state power. Jaurès sympathized with their struggles, but not with their rejection of politics. He saw the political process as essential for the liberation of labor, and was prepared to work with anyone, of whatever class, in achieving real freedoms for the common people. Reforms mattered and were possible, even though they never displaced a commitment to a more radical transformation of the social order.⁶⁹

That radical step went beyond industry and politics to a moral transformation of men and women, debased and degraded under the capitalist system. The new social order of Jaurès’s utopia was imaginable only if new men and women could make it happen. This idealist vision was central to his outlook. He chose socialism because he believed that “it seeks to develop all the faculties of man, his power to think, to love, and to will.”⁷⁰ These faculties were stunted under capitalism.⁷¹ The struggle for socialism was in effect a moral education, a turning away from habits of mind based on deference, inequality, and injustice. Socialism was “a moral revolution which is expressed through a material revolution. . . . It will be . . . a great religious revolution,” Jaurès continued. “I cannot conceive of society without religion, which is to say, without certain common beliefs which bind souls together and join them to the infinite, from which they have come and to which they will go.”⁷²

This third force in the socialist movement—more moral than industrial or political—was a powerful component of the international socialist movement, reborn after two decades of dormancy in 1889. The date of the birth of the second Socialist International is no accident. The great fair of 1889, leaving the Eiffel Tower as its permanent monument, drew to Paris those determined to celebrate the centennial of the French Revolution. Socialists like Jaurès claimed the legacy of that event, and they did so in a manner very different from that of the organizers of the world's fair. Marx himself in 1864 had helped inaugurate a first socialist international association. By 1876, that organization had collapsed. Thirteen years later, it was time to start again.

1889

The Paris conference of 1889 establishing what quickly became known as the Second International was a chaotic event. A total of 391 delegates from 20 nations or national groups attended. Poland did not yet exist, being divided among the Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian empires, but the Polish Socialist Party was in Paris. German socialists were prominent, as were the French. Others were there to represent tendencies rather than national parties or organizations. There were Swedish, Swiss, Austrian, Belgian, British and American “delegations,” though their constituencies were often unclear or virtually nonexistent. Linguistic barriers were formidable, and many people who were attached to obscure organizations or to none at all came in to intervene, heckle, or just enjoy the energy of the moment. “Crowded into a small hall,” the Austrian physician and socialist leader Victor Adler observed, they managed to create “a polyglot and temporarily helpless chaos.”⁷³

The first order of business was to determine who had the right to attend. Which socialist organizations were legitimate delegations? Initially all delegates were allowed to vote as individuals; later congresses would face the hard question as to who actually was a socialist. At this moment, the crucial task was simply to manage a turbulent and disorganized but exuberant constituent assembly of socialist opinion, and to create a forum for the exchange of ideas, news, and information about the socialist cause wherever it arose.

Resolutions were passed about the need to achieve an eight-hour working day and for legislation to regulate conditions at work. Here was a marker for the future. These material matters pointed the new International toward reform politics. Some delegates disputed this tack, and wanted to urge total rejection of political reforms, which could delay revolutionary transformation. But initially, general statements about the rights of labor carried the day.

The second program on which all could agree was international peace. The delegates were all opposed to standing armies, frequently used by leaders to crush their own workers on strike rather than foreign enemies. The advent of socialism, they cried, would abolish war. How that would happen was left to the imagination.

The figure who both embodied this socialist vision and tried in many ways to link it to concrete proposals in both domestic and international affairs was Jaurès. His powerful rhetoric disclosed both the idealism at the heart of the socialist project and its tendency to substitute passionate oratory for effective political strategies. Jaurès was the prophet of the socialist future. He pointed the way ahead, but he did not expect to see it.

1900

In late September 1900 in Paris, while the Exposition universelle was in full swing, the Second International convened on the Avenue Wagram in the French capital. Jaurès, as chairman of the French delegation, welcomed 2000 delegates representing 16 countries. They were meeting, he insisted, at a dangerous hour, when “capitalism was trying to whip up chauvinistic bestiality and nationalistic madness.” Against these artificial antagonisms, socialists opposed their sense of solidarity, their belief in the possibility of a “socialist peace.”⁷⁴

Domestic peace among French socialists was also difficult to preserve. As soon as the international delegates entered the hall, 60 or so members of dissident French groups marched in, too, singing the “Internationale.” Then came a dispute over who represented French socialism. Until the question was resolved, one delegate insisted, they could not form a delegation and, as hosts, could not even open the con-

gress. Jaurès, exasperated and furious, begged his colleagues not to “give to socialists of all countries the pathetic spectacle of their divisions.”⁷⁵ Democracy was in full display, in all its chaotic glory.

An hour later, the congress opened, despite the grumbles of the minority. Clara Zetkin, a German socialist delegate, translated French into German and German into French. Someone identified only as “Citizen Smith” produced English versions of the proceedings. Everything took time. The struggle for socialism, Jaurès scoffed at the Trocadéro the next day, had nothing to do with monotony.⁷⁶

There followed heated debates on the vexed question of the wisdom of working-class participation in middle-class governments. Co-option was always the risk of collaboration. The outcome was a compromise, accepting in exceptional circumstances the need for such arrangements, while reaffirming the ultimate aim of socialist groups—the supercession of capitalism.

To help reduce the level of friction within the international socialist movement and to create a structure which would carry on international work between congresses, held at four-year intervals, the delegates agreed to the creation of an International Socialist Bureau. This body would link groups around the world and serve as a source of information and support among widely scattered working-class organizations.

The next year the Bureau was installed in Brussels, and from 1906 its Secretary, Camille Huysmans, published reports and then a periodical bulletin to disseminate information of interest to working-class organizations and activists around the world. For instance, in the January 1910 bulletin, there is a “Circular on the events in Argentina,” including documents on “the situation of our South-American comrades, whose political and syndical organizations are virtually suppressed by the government of the Argentine Republic.” Mario Bravo, secretary of the Argentine Socialist Party, issued an appeal for funds to help support socialists facing martial law, imposed after the assassination of the chief of police. He also published a list of the names of exiled socialists, implicitly urging sympathizers to help with their plight.⁷⁷ Solidarity was always both moral and material.

The Road to War

While the struggle of labor for recognition and dignity went on in every country represented in the International Socialist Bureau, the movement never lost sight of its overarching commitment to work for world peace. “No peace; no justice” was the watchword of the day. In the Paris conference, the Polish-born German delegate, Rosa Luxemburg, offered the following proposals: socialists must educate youth against militarism, vote against military and naval credits and against colonial expeditions, and be prepared to coordinate international action when the risk of war becomes evident.

In 1907, at the Stuttgart congress of the Socialist International, delegates reaffirmed their commitment to take active steps in the event of international crises. But just as in the earlier dispute as to who was a delegate, there were profound ambiguities in the position they advanced. Some insisted that there be a general strike of all working people in the event of a war crisis; others argued that such a position was futile. The outcome satisfied everyone and no one. “In the case of war being imminent,” the Congress declared, “the working classes and their parliamentary representatives in the countries concerned shall be bound, with the assistance of the International Socialist Bureau, to do all they can to prevent the breaking out of war, using for this purpose the means which appear to them the most efficacious, and which must naturally vary according to the struggle of classes, and to the general political conditions.”⁷⁸ Would there be a general strike in a war crisis? Perhaps.

In place of precise strategies, socialists could always resort to noble words. And the noblest socialist orator of them all was Jaurès. He had what has been termed a “symphonic” approach to oratory. He could change registers with the mood of his audience, introduce cadences in his message which had both mobilizing and at times hypnotic effects. His was a rhetoric of combat.⁷⁹

When war in the Balkans threatened to engulf Europe in 1912, the International Socialist Bureau convened “un Congrès international extraordinaire” in Basel. There, 555 delegates from all over Europe

assembled on 24–25 November. A public procession accompanied the delegates to the cathedral where Jaurès spoke. It was led by the “workers” cyclists’ union and drummer boys dressed up as William Tell. Following were “phalanxes of young people accompanying a chariot of peace, in which young girls in white waved palm leaves in place of olive branches.” The municipal band was followed by “a veritable forest of red banners.” Pacifist slogans were prominent. “It is better to shed tears than torrents of blood,” read one. The procession, singing their national songs of solidarity—the “Song of Work” for the Austrians, the “Internationale” for the French—crossed the Rhine, passed the City Hall and arrived at the cathedral. Twenty-three bell-ringers set in motion the great bells of the cathedral.

Six thousand people crammed into the candlelit cathedral, and with the echoes of the “Hymn of Peace” in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony ringing in their ears, they awaited the words of Jean Jaurès. “It was a moment,” the official report affirmed, “that all the comrades present will remember for the rest of their lives.” The workers’ chorale of Basel set the tone; but Jaurès lifted it to the firmament. He started soberly:

It is first on the shoulders of our brothers in the Balkans that responsibility lies. Now our Austrian comrades feel the burden too. But the burden rests as much on the entire International. . . . Capitalism is reflecting on the question: is war or peace more in its interests. Governments are hesitating. The balance of destiny shifts in their trembling hands. And that is why the proletariat throws its force into the balance on the side of peace.

In this struggle, I hope we will not be alone. The Christians have opened to us the gates of their Church. Our aim fits their faith and their will—to preserve the peace. May all Christians who follow seriously the words of their Master fortify this spirit. We are all opposed to those ready to deliver the multitudes to the bronze clutches of the demon of war. It is up to us, workers and socialists of every country, to make war impossible.

. . . We have entered this church to the sound of bells which are a clarion call to general reconciliation. I recall the motto which Schiller inscribed as an epigram to his “Song of the Bell”: *Vivos voco, mortuos plango, fulgura frango!* *Vivos voco*: I call the living to resist the monster who would ravish the land. *Mortuos plango*: I weep for the countless dead, now buried in the

east, whose rotting stench fills us with remorse. *Fulgora frango*: I will harness the thunderbolts of war now breaking across the skies.

. . . The closer the peril comes, the more we must ask ourselves: if this monstrous thing comes about, if it becomes necessary for workers to assassinate their brothers, what can we do to prevent this horror? . . . When the clouds threaten, when the waves become turbulent, the sailor cannot predict what needs to be done at every moment. But the Internationale must raise its voice for peace, and to take every legal or revolutionary step to stop war and to call the war-mongers to the bar of justice. . . . We must bring our message to the masses; we must confirm in all the Parliaments that we want peace. . . . And we shall leave this edifice swearing an oath to save peace and civilization.⁸⁰

As it happened, a general European war did not break out at the end of 1912, though no one—including Jaurès—believed that the rhetoric of Basel had made any difference. The meeting in the cathedral mattered in another way. It crystallized the socialist vision which Jaurès made his own. It reflected his appeal to the imagination, his use of prophetic language to express his belief in reason, in persuasion, in the force of human decency, and in the necessity of justice. In these struggles, words mattered tremendously; to Jaurès, oratory had the capacity ultimately to outlaw war.⁸¹

Eighteen months later, war did come. A few hours before its outbreak, Jaurès was assassinated by a nationalist fanatic fearful of another address like that delivered at Basel Cathedral.⁸² What Jaurès's position would have been is of course impossible to know. We can state with some clarity that Jaurès was not a pacifist, but rather a socialist patriot, steeped in the Jacobin tradition of French Republicanism.⁸³ A new army, of the people and serving the people, was one he championed in 1911.⁸⁴ But it was the old armies which went to war just three years later and, by doing so, destroyed much of what Jaurès had dedicated his life to achieving.

Conclusion

Paris, 1900: three very different visions of the future, each concerned in different ways with peace. Albert Kahn wanted to capture the face of humanity, and by gazing into it, to make war impossible. The entrepreneurs of the Exposition universelle of 1900 wanted to capture the muscular productivity of capitalism, and to show how a new world could be build, a world in which war was not necessary. And the Socialists of the Second International thirsted for justice, and dreamed of a world both without hunger and without the clash of arms. Each vision was utopian in that each was a way of imagining the twentieth century without the horrors of modern, industrialized warfare. And yet, these visions of a better world were unlikely to materialize, because the men and women who framed them could not evade who they were: European citizens of an imperial system controlling the globe, a system about to detonate the most devastating war in history. This was as true of workers bound to country as much as to class, as it was to bankers like Kahn or bureaucrats like Picard. In 1914, war engulfed them all.

In 1900 and in the years leading up to war, there were two competing carriers of social progress: the nation and the working class. In 1914, all combatant countries fused the two. The nation and the working class became one, united in defense against the enemy. By the end of the war, four years later, that partnership had broken down. A new working-class movement, based in Russia, confronted the victorious Allies, surveying the wreckage of Europe and a new array of nation-states, hewn out of the defeated German, Austrian, and Turkish empires.

How could a lasting peace come about? Delegates gathered once more in Paris in 1919, this time to rebuild a world order and to outlaw war. The man who seemed to hold the keys to this peaceful future was not a banker, nor a bureaucrat, nor a socialist orator. He was the American president Woodrow Wilson, and his minor utopia was couched in the language of self-determination. What this term meant and what happened to his project is the subject of the next chapter.

2 1919

Perpetual War/Perpetual Peace

The Great War of 1914–18 had torn up the map of Europe and, on account of imperial ties, the map of the world. In the first half of 1919, people from all over the world converged on Paris to join in the discussion surrounding the peace conference and to influence the outcome. Some were official delegates; others were there because during the war their people had a glimpse of freedom. After four years of carnage, this was a time of hope, some of it utopian, about the way the war had opened up the possibility of an enduring peace. Paris 1919 seemed to be a place where the people of the world, after the most destructive war in history, might indeed be offered “a second chance on earth” to avoid war. Now we know that would not be. But at the time, expectations of a transformation in the international order were high.¹

The peace conference was a patchwork of the old and the new. The

world war had been fought by states in defense of territorial boundaries. Britain went to war on the side of France and Russia when Germany violated the territorial integrity of Belgium. Those boundaries were restored. For the Allies, the critical issues were state security and the territorial boundaries of the successor states of the defeated Central Powers. These were the time-honored core of international diplomacy.

But within this history, there is another one which deserves our attention. It is the “minor utopian” vision of self-determination for all, the realization of the national aspirations of peoples to determine their political future in their own territory. Once achieved, self-determination was a form of insurance against war. Take away the imperial element in international affairs, and armed conflict would simply be unnecessary. The vision of self-determination is, therefore, a set of ideas about how to avoid war. That is how it was understood at the time, as a key element in the “new diplomacy” which would replace the failed old diplomacy discredited by the war.²

Nine million men lost their lives in the Great War. Three times as many men were maimed, injured in body and mind while on active service. Millions of veterans, orphans, and widows never escaped the shadow of the war. Without official prodding, a groundswell of sentiment rose in every combatant country supporting the view that the peace settlement following the war had to be of a different order from those in the past. It could not simply punish the losers and distribute the gains among the victors. It had to abolish war, or risk the total destruction of society as they knew it. What we learned through the war, said the French writer Paul Valéry, is that our civilization is mortal.³

“Never again” is a term we now associate with the Holocaust; but the phrase was on the lips of millions of men and women a generation earlier. The fact that “Never” lasted less than two decades should not obscure the depth of the feeling behind it. Substantial numbers of people—in and out of uniform—believed fervently that peacemaking in 1919 had to make another world war unthinkable. This chapter is about that dream of outlawing war and on the project of building the

peace. On what foundations? On the platform of a League of Nations dedicated to a new world order, one based on the twin principles of the nonviolent resolution of international conflict and the slow and steady progression of subject peoples to self-determination.

“Self-determination” is the minor utopia explored in this chapter. Its prophet was the American president Woodrow Wilson. He saw in self-determination an essential key to a future without war. There were others who agreed, but who defined self-determination in ways Wilson could not or would not accept. The African-American writer W. E. B. Du Bois and the Chinese diplomat Wellington Koo were among them. Why, they asked, should self-determination be limited to the white race? Was it not a matter of universal right rather than of racial privilege?

Du Bois and Koo lost the argument. Self-determination remained a racial privilege rather than a human right. Why did this happen, and what were the consequences? This chapter explores these questions, and, in doing so, it throws light on what may be termed the dilemma of liberal imperialism. In the period leading up to the peace settlement, both before and after the Armistice, the peacemakers never made up their minds as to whether they were inaugurating a new order in international affairs or shoring up imperial power in the guise of a system of internationally sanctioned mandates. Self-determination was the order of the day, as Lloyd George and Wilson affirmed, but so were both the truncation of German power in Europe and the transfer of German colonies to Allied hands. Was the settlement a step toward self-rule or toward imperial hegemony? The answer is both. Wilson accepted this contradiction in order to secure Allied support for his central objective—creating the League of Nations. But by aiming in two contradictory directions at once, the vision of an enduring peace vanished in the process of its framing.

In Paris in 1919, the concept of “self-determination” turned out to be more a slogan than a destination. It shriveled from a “minor utopia” to a minor diplomatic adjustment of the old order. Whenever the term was

used, it exposed the contradictions at the heart of liberal imperialism—a belief in democracy and in benign domination. One element in the failure of the Versailles settlement was located, therefore, in the inability of the victorious powers to realize that, after 1914, they could be democrats or imperialists, but not both at the same time. Imperialism on the Victorian model was no longer possible. The Allies could no longer afford it; the coffers of the European powers were drained by the effort to win the war and by the huge burden of debt incurred during the conflict. But trying to maintain imperial power under the guise of stewarding dependencies toward self-government could not work indefinitely. Setting in motion expectations of self-determination without intending to move in that direction was one way to ensure that conflict would recur throughout the world—in China, in Palestine, in Europe itself.

In a host of ways, an ambiguous commitment to the concept of self-determination was lethal to the settlement of 1919. The German sense of grievance about being forced to accept sole responsibility for the war, as embodied in clause 231 of the Treaty of Paris, informed a wide body of opinion on the need to revise the treaty. And one way to do so was to give those who saw themselves as German the opportunity to join together with others in the expression of their “self-determination.” If ethnic Germans in the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian empire voted to join their brethren in a reconstructed Reich, then they were simply being good Wilsonians.

The peacemakers’ flawed and partial commitment to “self-determination,” as the term was understood at the time, undermined the effort to provide a stable peace either in Europe or in those areas around the world where Europeans and Americans ruled in formal and informal ways. The tension between liberal commitments and imperial realities—so evident in the 1900 Paris expo two decades earlier—was played out time and again in the interwar years. In this chapter I show that that outcome was imbedded in the thinking of those fashioning the peace in 1919.

“Debatable Areas and Unfortunate Peoples”: The View from Above

How did the idea of “self-determination” come to dominate the Paris Peace Conference? There was little trace of it in the first years of the conflict. But after the war had been transformed in 1917 through two Russian revolutions and American entry into the war, the rights of peoples to break with the past was an issue of singular importance. The clash of empires made it inevitable that the losers would cede sovereignty and territory. Discussions of war aims now went beyond territorial and colonial questions to embrace commitments to democracy and the right to self-determination of subject peoples.

With the mobilization of an army of several million, and the promise of millions more on the way, American views on war aims took on increasing significance. American economic power gave President Wilson added leverage. In 1917 and 1918, the White House and the State Department devoted much time to these matters. The president and his advisers shared a familiar and enduring American sense of moral superiority over the combatant countries on both sides. Having tried and failed between 1914 and 1916 to act as an honest broker of a negotiated peace, and furthermore, having been provoked to go to war by the German U-boat campaign of 1917, Wilson felt entitled to develop a set of principles to govern the kind of world to come out of the war. And he expected to be listened to. In a speech to Congress on 8 January 1918, these guidelines emerged as the 14 points, including centrally the commitment of the American government to open diplomacy and to the freedom of the seas, as well as to the construction of a new international league.⁴

The central question was how to prevent Germany in future from disturbing the peace of the world; but while the war was still undecided, it was difficult to be precise about the ways to accomplish this, or about the boundary changes needed to effect an enduring transformation in European affairs.

One focus of discussion was about territorial issues. Another concerned dependent territories, and what to do with German holdings

in Africa and Asia. And then there remained the still thornier issues of the transformation of imperial relationships and the construction of a League of Nations both to oversee colonial affairs and to defuse potentially explosive conflicts between its members. European boundaries had to be set, to be sure, but there were other, more structural changes in the international system mooted in the years 1917–19.

The key to these new issues was the right to self-determination. No one knew precisely what this right actually entailed. Which populations qualified for the right? Who was the “self” doing the determining? How was the “determining” to be framed and administered? And what defined a “people” whose existence by that very fact gave them this right?⁵ The search for self-determination is the subject of this chapter.

The Inquiry

In the United States, President Wilson led a multitiered effort to work out both war aims and the precise meaning of the term “self-determination.” He delegated much of this work to his close adviser Colonel Edward Mandell House. Neither an elected official nor an employee of the Department of State, he worked for the president alone. House’s assignment was to bring together expert opinion on contested issues, the resolution of which was bound to shape the world after the war. The outcome was termed at the time “The Inquiry,” a wide-ranging set of American academic explorations of the way the future could be constructed.

This investigation is revealing in many ways. Its authors came from different disciplines in the American academy and brought to the effort formidable knowledge of international affairs. But for our purposes, they show clearly how the “minor utopia” of self-determination was doomed from the start. American thinking on the subject even before the Paris peace conference fully exposed the contradictions and confusions inherent in Wilson’s concept of self-determination. This episode also revealed the enduring tendency among Americans in authority to stand above and to preach to those peoples needing help to reach the promised land of liberal democracy.

To illustrate these points, we can start with a document prepared

on 27 November 1917 about the activities of the Inquiry. A mere three weeks after the Bolshevik revolution, the committee set out two fields of research they intended to pursue:

Field I. The Powers

The Friends—The United States, British Empire, etc.

The Enemies

The neutrals—Denmark, Holland etc.

Field II. Debatable areas and unfortunate peoples

Alsace-Lorraine

Schleswig

Trentino

Baltic Littoral

Jews

Pacific Islands

Nationalities of Eastern Europe

China, Turkey, Middle East⁶

“Debatable areas and unfortunate peoples”: what a revealing phrase to describe the assumptions of the men and women trying to imagine the contours of the international history of the rest of the twentieth century.

In the short term, these categories were set up for a specific purpose: to provide President Wilson with the best briefs possible on the shape of a world order to be fashioned at a peace conference to be convened at the end of hostilities. That was the intention. Let us consider how it was realized. At the heart of the inquiry was a group of four individuals who reported to Colonel House and who were personally approved by President Wilson. These men formed the Inquiry’s executive committee. First came Sidney E. Mezes, president of the City College of New York, a philosopher of ethics and religion, and—as it happened—a brother-in-law of Colonel House.⁷ The second was Isaiah Bowman, a Canadian-born president of the American Geographical Society and professor at Yale. His special interest was Latin America, where he had led the Yale expedition that reached Machu-Picchu in 1908.⁸ The third was James T. Shotwell, professor of history at Columbia and a central figure in the work of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,