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Suggested headline: ‘What might happen to our humanity?’

BERKELEY, 14 MARCH—Here are a few headlines published in *The New York Times* and other influential American newspapers since the U.S. provoked Russia to intervene against the Ukrainian regime in February 2022:

“Life Is Better with a Great Garden Hose.”

“How a Taxidermist Spends Her Sundays.”

“How a Food Stylist and Housewares Designer Spends Her Sundays.”

“How a Neurodiverse Musical Theater Artist Spends Her Sundays.”

“Do these shoes make me look like a tourist?”

“Is it bad to wash your hair every day?”

And here are some headlines published in these same newspapers since last October, when Israel began its barbarous siege against the 2.3 million Palestinians living in Gaza:

“Will Taylor Swift Visit the White House?”

“Tuxedos Stole the Show at This Year’s Oscars.”

“Jeremy Strong Isn’t Sure Who He Is.”

“Is Cabbage the New Bacon?”

“Kate Middleton’s Story Is About So Much More Than Kate Middleton.”

“We Don’t Know Where Kate Is But She Knows Where We’re Headed.”

“Leave Kate Middleton Alone!”

As a former correspondent abroad, I have taken up the peculiar habit of collecting headlines that reflect on the commonly shared preoccupations of Americans, their thoughts and feelings—the American *zeitgeist*, this is to say. These are drawn from a large inventory stored in my computer. What do they tell us?

With Russia’s intervention in Ukraine—a military operation I consider regrettable but necessary given the Western alliance’s incessant efforts to subvert the Russian Federation—the U.S. brought us as close to “nuclear Armageddon,” Biden’s phrase, as we have been at least since the Cuban missile crisis 62 years ago. In the case of Gaza, the U.S. fully supports Israel as it bombs, shoots, and now starves Palestinians in the cause of an ethnic-cleansing genocide that begs comparisons with the diabolic viciousness of the Reich in the 1930s and 1940s.

There is something quite “off,” even indecent about Americans’ fascination with Taylor Swift and garden hoses in these circumstances. Among most people—not all, by any means—one finds little grasp of the gravity of our moment or of our obligation to respond to it. Not even the threat of a nuclear war or the mass murder of innocent children, women, and men stirs most of us. It suggests a collective pathology, a shared psychological disturbance. How can we account for this—this culture of ennui, I will call it?

It is true enough that our corporate media are dedicated to keeping Americans thoroughly distracted as the policy cliques in Washington conduct the frequently criminal business of our late-phase imperium. Think about Kate Middleton, they say, not the wars and barbarities Washington provokes and sponsors in your names. In this way we are encouraged to live in our private worlds, wherein we fill our minds with frivolities and assume, in our eternal present, nothing will ever change.

But this cynical use of the power of media does not cancel our question. No, it prompts the question: What Americans read and see on television may be malign in its intent, but it is nonetheless effective. This must be acknowledged.

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For most of the modern era, people in America and elsewhere in the West were not aware of the price others paid for the Western way of life. To address this point very broadly, the English and the French did not know much about and so did not have to think much about the suffering inflicted on far-away colonial subjects so that they could heat their homes, wear silk clothing, drink coffee, or drive cars with rubber tyres. The level of technological development thus encouraged—but did not altogether excuse—a prevalent indifference to others.

The digital age marks a very significant transformation in this connection. People on one side of the world are now able to know what occurs on the other side more or less instantly. This is true despite our media's endless efforts to distract. We can witness atrocities, starvation, and all manner of suffering as they occur—often in “real time.” I have for some time thought that the human mind has not yet adapted to the unprecedented availability of all the information digital technologies have

made possible. And so our minds seek protection in celebrity gossip, home improvements, recipes, and the like. Our ennui becomes a self-induced pathology.

It behooves us to understand these tendencies in our collective character, it seems to me. It is an imperative if we are to retrieve ourselves from the diminished state of ennui, indifference, apathy—altogether the anomie that has overtaken us—and so “rehumanize” ourselves and our modes of living.

We must consider certain prominent features of contemporary civilization to achieve this understanding in the cause of a renewed attachment to our world and to those who live in it with us. Ours is a technological civilization: This is the obvious place to begin a self-examination of the kind I propose.

Many honorable philosophers and writers over many centuries have considered the impact of technological development on the human psyche. The two I find most pertinent to our circumstances are Lewis Mumford and Jacques Ellul. These were multi-sided intellects. They were both sociologists, philosophers, historians, and students of technology in all of its implications and consequences. Mumford’s *Technics and Civilization* came out in 1934. Ellul published *La technique ou l’enjeu du siècle* in 1954. It appeared in English a decade later as *The Technological Society*.

Technology alters the human consciousness, if I am not stating too simply a theme these writers shared. Its function is to intervene between the human being and his or her reality. As it serves this purpose it tends to isolate the individual from his or her world and from others: There is a new layer to the experience in life. Ellul was especially concerned with the extent to which technology comes to overtake us—the master becomes the servant and the servant the master. Here is a passage from the English translation of Ellul’s book:

«At issue here is evaluating the danger of what might happen to our humanity in the present half-century, and distinguishing between what we want to keep and what we are ready to lose, between what we can welcome as legitimate human development and what we should reject with our last ounce of strength as dehumanization.»



One of the most significant consequences of technological development, in turn, has been the division of labor. This, too, has a history nearly as long as human history and has inspired many thinkers to consider it, from the Greeks and Romans to our time. John Kenneth Galbraith, the noted economist and author who served under the Kennedy administration, noted in *The New Industrial State* (Houghton Mifflin, 1967) that the method of technological advance requires breaking down each task to its irreducible fragments. We may take this as the principle that has from the first inspired the division of human labor.

Long before Galbraith, Adam Smith noted approvingly that the division of labor yielded a dramatic increase in efficiency and productivity. This is perfectly true. When Henry Ford installed the world's first moving assembly line in 1913, there were 85 steps to producing a car, and each worker was responsible for his step and no other. In this way the division of labor led workers to acquire specialized skill sets. In this modern phase of technological development they would know one thing very well.

In this way the division of labor has had many consequences by way of how we think about ourselves and how we should live. This mode of work confers skills but does not require much intellectual development. So it makes people smart—they know their jobs very well—but also ignorant: They know all about the bolts

they must attach as the car passes them on the line but little about the car that emerges at the end of the line. This came to shape people's minds such that they had less interest in or understanding of the human condition because they were alienated from their humanity and the humanity of others. It became less important to be educated in the humanities than to be good at making a good living.

Adam Smith praised the division of labor as an instrument of progress in *The Wealth of Nations*, but he also saw its deleterious effects on human psychology: It made them "as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become." A half-century later de Tocqueville put it this way in Volume 1 of *Democracy in America*: "Nothing tends to materialize man, and to deprive his work of the faintest trace of mind, more than extreme division of labor."

America is a nation of atomized, privatized individuals, driven by their consumer appetites. Their connections to each other tend to be slight. They may know their work well but have a very limited grasp of and little interest in the whole in any given context. Yes, we know these things. Scholars in various disciplines have written extensively of these attributes. Yes again, media have done much to encourage this.

We tend to explain ourselves to ourselves in ways that encourage us to assume our condition is a recent phenomenon and can be remedied easily enough: We must join more community organizations, we must take public transportation, we must vote in local elections. But the culture of ennui, as I have named it, has much deeper roots, and it is this we must grasp and accept if we are not to delude ourselves. Our ennui is the inevitable result of the civilization we have made for ourselves over some centuries.

This is how we can usefully understand Americans' indifference to so many events, even to the threat of nuclear war and the genocide of a people with the support of those who purport to lead us. It is with indifference that people will tend to think (or otherwise) and feel (or not feel) in a technological civilization. Is it too much to say this civilization is responsible for a kind of collective psychological damage?

Technology has mastered us in the course of the modern era. This is our reality. It has led us to glorify industrial capitalism as a system from which there is no turning back and to which there is no alternative. Most of us recall Margaret Thatcher's dreadful assertion during her years as Britain's prime minister: "There is no society. There are only individuals." What makes this assertion dreadful, I have long thought, is the extent to which it describes us as we have become.

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