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Twentieth Century: A History of the World 1901-Present

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Arthur C. Clarke once remarked that the time would come when nothing of the twentieth century would be remembered except the moon landing in 1969. Clearly that time has not come. Indeed we seem to be in danger of forgetting Neil Armstrong's small step altogether. More than half of the planet's inhabitants today have been born since a man walked on the moon. It is one of the many pleasures of J.M. Roberts, *History of the Twentieth Century* that he remembers to give this incredible achievement the prominence it probably deserves.

At the start of the twenty-first century it sometimes appears that the only event of the previous century that is being actively remembered is the Holocaust. It is right that it should be remembered, little short of essential, but in the last ten years it has started to exert the gravitational of a great black hole on our thinking about the century, dragging all interpretations into its orbit. It is commonplace to hear the opinion that the century was one of unparalleled barbarism. This is true in a sense; the barbarism of the century was on a far greater scale because everything was on a far greater scale. But such a view misses the obvious fact that every past century can show terrifying examples of human capacity for evil. One of the intriguing things about this century is that this evil actually gets noticed. Nazi leaders referred continually to past atrocities which they believed had been forgotten and assumed that in the long view their own crimes would not be remembered. They misjudged the mood of the century and not just because they were defeated.

The handling of the Holocaust, like the handling of the space programme, is a reasonable 'Rorschach' test in a big general history. It gets five pages of Robert's narrative (out of just over 850 pages). No functionalism here or reflections on the Holocaust and modernity. The Nazis were evil crackpots from a civilised society that ought to have known better. This is perhaps a bit simplistic, indeed the idea that Germany ought to be

judged more harshly because of its higher level of civilisation than the reader should judge Russia or Japan is worryingly reminiscent of the very nationalist assumptions which led to the brutality in the first place. Yet there is something in it, the moral shock we still feel is one of recognition. It is difficult to say anything particularly profound about disasters on this scale in five pages. But in a global history of the century that balance is probably about right.

Grand historical synthesis is a tough task and those who write it are vulnerable to the carping of specialists. It is, nevertheless, a responsibility of historians to try to respond to the perfectly legitimate curiosity of the general public, those who want to be told what happened and what it means. J.M. Roberts is a past master in this field and his courage in facing the challenge has rightly earned him respect. The book is an effective combination of narrative exposition in which the great political set pieces of the century are laid out for the reader and, perhaps of more interest to specialists, a series of speculations and discussions on the big structural changes.

If grand synthesis naturally generates criticism, so does contemporary history and finding a viewpoint that will stand the test of time is notoriously difficult when many of the events described occurred within living memory of the reader. Even defining the subject can be controversial. There are at least three competing twentieth centuries, not just Robert's 1901-2000, the literal century; but also a 'short' twentieth century lasting from 1914 (or1917) to 1989 (or 1991) and a 'long' twentieth century beginning around 1870.

The short twentieth century, on the face of things, seems to have the strongest claims. But one suspects that the appeal of the idea will diminish over time. The drama of the 'Age of Extremes' has some serious problems as a unit of analysis, not least in its circularity, the rise and fall of the Soviet Union is defined as the central story of the century and the chronology is rigged accordingly. Whilst the Soviet Union was never quite, 'Upper Volta with rockets'; future historians are unlikely to afford it such centrality.

The idea of a 'long' Twentieth century is sure to gain ground. The unification of Germany, the Meiji restoration, the dramatic transformation of the USA during reconstruction, the first stirrings of women's emancipation, mass democracy and the beginning of demographic transition. Perhaps above all the acceleration of the commodification of agriculture in the 'Neo-Europes' and the growth of world trade all point strongly to roughly 1870 as a hinge. Yet that is a history which it might not yet be possible to write. The problem with the long century is that the ramifications of these things are far from being played out, we simply don't know where they will end or even if they ever will.

Roberts has chosen the literal century, somewhat apologetically. Apologies are not required, 1901-2000 is in fact are remarkably coherent epoch in almost every respect. The century came in with 'irrational exuberance' in the economy; driven by mergers, speculation and optimistic prognoses of new technologies and went out exactly the same way. In 1901 CE, the great 'powers' were involved in bullying China into the world system in order to exploit the huge potential market. In 2000 CE, essentially the same powers were cordially inviting China into the World Trade Organisation for essentially the same reasons. Both the changes and the continuities give structure to this chronology.

If the story of the rise of the world's most populous nation from prostration to equality is one of the key changes, the story of the world's most powerful nation, the first and only historical 'hyper power' is the continuity. In 1901 the first signs of the economic superiority of the United States were evident. By 1945 this dominance had been translated into complete strategic and military dominance. This was a dominance which was never fully lost during the illusory years of cold war 'bipolarity' and in 1991 this dominance suddenly became manifest again.

Economic power and military might have been accompanied by growing ideological and cultural hegemony. Much of what we mistakenly think of as globalisation is really the unprecedented dominance of a single power, which become so total that it was hard to see it for what it was. Pokemon and ABBA might reach a world audience, but only if they speak English and they are transient phenomena compared with Disney and Elvis. Roberts tries manfully to prevent the United States from dominating the narrative and almost

succeeds. One feels sometimes that discussion of the USA is being rationed. Nevertheless it does dominate the story. That isn't Roberts's fault, that is just the way 'it actually was'.

From the outset, Roberts has chosen to blend together a strong conventional political narrative with a careful examination of structural transformation. His starting point is surely the correct one for any truly global history in that he emphasises the 'weight of the past'. Dramatic as the nineteenth century had undoubtedly been, there was a good deal of a traditional, almost immemorial, world that still existed in 1900. The village was still the place where the overwhelming majority of people on the planet lived and the villages were particular and local. The political *ancien regime* had adapted surprisingly well. Nine-tenths of humanity were subject to monarchs.

Literacy had reached high levels in Western Europe and North America, but most of the world still lived in an oral or semi-oral culture. Religious belief was pervasive. The genuinely modern cities were few and indeed industrialisation existed mostly in pockets and was much more partial than is often realised. Even in London or New York in 1900 a great deal of the horsepower was quite literally horsepower.

From the weight of the past Roberts moves on to the anticipations of the future. The development of science necessarily plays a central role in any good narrative of the century. Again the 'literal' century justifies itself. If the nineteenth century was marked by a revolution in biology, then the years either side of 1900 saw the Curies, Rutherford, Einstein and Planck completely transform the understanding of physics. Roberts is rather less interested in the parallel transformation in the arts. Cubism gets a belated name check much later in the book; Proust, Picasso and Stravinsky lack even that.

Perhaps this bias towards science and technology is in itself a fair reflection of the century's biases and certainly outside of a very small number of enthusiasts the usual reaction to modern art has been one of rejection. But genuinely popular culture fairs even less well and that is a significant absence. This will be discussed below.

Roberts then moves on to discuss structures. At the centre of this book, as it should be, is the growth of global population. The trebling of world population and the shift in its distribution is pre-eminently the 'big fact' of the century. Equally welcome is the stress on the history of more than half of the human species. Perhaps the most obvious advance on earlier grand narrative history is that no one would now dream of writing this kind of history without paying attention to women. Roberts handles this well. He keeps his eye on the subject throughout, which is only appropriate because changes in the lives of women are probably amongst the most profound and revolutionary of the century and the most obvious discontinuity with past human existence. Some may feel that he doesn't devote enough space to this, still preferring to concentrate on traditional political narratives. This would be a mistake. After all wars, revolutions, depressions, genocide and famine don't just impact on men. Perhaps some of Roberts's opinions about these developments are a bit whiggish for some tastes. But the record of the century is, on balance, progressive.

The narrative sections are well handled. Specialists are bound to take issue with specifics. I can't honestly say that I would agree with quite a lot of what Roberts writes about the First World War. But even in this section there are some serious insights; for example he rightly stresses that the combat losses were balanced by the fact that this was the first war in history where deaths in combat outnumbered deaths from disease. This fact, of central significance, is all too often overlooked. Inevitably more valuable to many of us will be the attention that Roberts pays to the vast geographical zone that many English historians seem to lump together as 'Extra-Europe'. Anyone who needs a quick introduction to Latin America in the twentieth century (which includes most of the historians I know) could do a lot worse.

The strands begin to weave together by the time Roberts gets to the great depression. His description of this as the first 'world historical' event is surely right. Nothing illustrates better the emergence of a global trading economy than its collapse.

To review each section would ultimately make this review as long, if not longer, than the book. So, in a

single bound, to the conclusion. Roberts notes that one apparently paradoxical feature of the century has been the simultaneous proliferation of sovereign nations and the simultaneous proliferation of trans-national organisations. Of course it is only apparently paradoxical, the former is a direct cause of the latter. Yet the power of at least some of the latter is something without precedent. There has never before been an institution with the global power of the IMF or the World Bank. But this is only part of a bigger story. Roberts sees emerging in the course of the century is the first global civilisation. Literally a civilisation, as it is rooted in cities. It sits on top of other deep-rooted civilisations; Chinese, Islamic, Japanese, but its style and assumptions are Western.

The cities of the world in their fundamentals are coming to resemble each other, with universities and airports, police forces and fire brigades, skyscrapers and restaurants. Certain features might differ, developing world cities cluster their appalling poverty towards the edges; English speaking ones encircle their slightly less appalling poverty in the centre. But the general urban principles are the same. For Roberts the century that saw a decline in the formal power of Europe also saw European assumptions conquer the world.

In this I think he is wrong. This global civilisation, if it is at all European, is European at one remove. Florence and Athens are at best distant grandparents of the global civilisation; the parents are Chicago and Detroit. Indeed American influence has reshaped European civilisation beyond measure in the course of the century, not least by enforcing democracy upon it.

The other thing missing in the conclusion and indeed in the book, is a real sense of what this civilisation actually is. Here the neglect of popular culture is a real problem. This is a history of the twentieth century without Caruso and Chaplin, without Garbo and Sinatra, without Elvis Presley and Mohammed Ali, without Madonna and Maradona. Roberts highlights the problem of happiness at the end, pondering why the unquestioned material progress of the century does not seem to have made the third of the global population that has benefited significantly happier (although they are now unhappy in longer lives and much greater comfort.). But he neglects the sphere in which most of the world seeks its fleeting vision of that happiness whilst learning its unattainability and frustration. The mystique of celebrity is a contemporary global religion, but its prophets disappoint, not least themselves. Each of the above in their pursuit of happiness; though sex and food; drugs and alcohol; political idealism and even obsessive privacy, says something about the state of the species in the century.

Of course in the end this may not matter. These icons are already familiar and the joy of a book like this is for the reader to learn what he or she does not already know. But in the end it does leave a sense that although this is a fine history of the century, it is not quite a complete one.

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