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The Intellectual Fallout from World War 1

William W. Dean, Ph.D.

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Introduction

Let me begin with some general thoughts about the importance of ideas in human life. All ideas—good, bad, indifferent—are rooted in human experience. Every thought we think comes to us in specific circumstances. The sudden flash of memory that raises the question, "Did I lock the door?" deals with a specific door to a particular house at a particular address. Whatever our age, job, responsibility, or relationship, our ideas are linked to the contexts in which we live. I intend here to explore the intellectual fallout from World War I as the context of the roots post-modernism.

One of the surprises I encountered as I began to prepare this talk was the discovery of a long list of titles that linked World War 2 to postmodernism, but none that linked World War 1 in the same way. That seemed odd to me, especially when I considered the similarities between the Existentialists of the interwar period with the early postmodernists after World War 2. My very limited purpose in this paper is to explore one of many possible links between the unanticipated carnage

of World War 1, through existentialism, to the attack on meaning in history posed

by postmodernism.

It is difficult for us to understand the impact of historical events on those

who first experienced them because we know the outcome that they could not.

The exuberant thirty years before the outbreak of WW1 were perhaps the most

optimistic period in American history.

This was a period of exceptional technical and educational progress in

Europe and America. I am going to spend a few minutes here in an attempt to help

you see the rapidly changing world as the pre-World War 1 generation saw it.

1854, Elisha Otis invented the elevator brake, opening the way to the skyscraper.
1859, storage battery by Gaston Plante
1867, Sylvester Roper built the first powered motorcycle—powered by a coal-fired
     steam engine.
1869, John Wesley Hyatt invented celluloid, made from plant fiber, the first
     plastic.
1873, blue jeans by Levi Strauss and Jacob Davis in brown canvass and blue denim
1874, the first commercial typewriter was manufactured by the gunmakers E.
     Remington and Sons.
1875-1925, Luther Burbank developed 800 new strains of plants, including the
     Idaho potato that helped Ireland recover from its potato famine
1876, Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone
1879, James Ritty created the mechanical cash register to limit employee theft in
     booming retail sales. Eventually became the National Cash Register Co.
1879, Thomas Edison invented the electric light bulb that transformed and
     extended working and leisure time far into the night.
1882, Henry Seeley invented the electric iron. It weighed 15 pounds and took four
     hours to heat.
1884, Lewis Waterman invented the fountain pen, revolutionizing writing, when
     everything was hand-written.
1886, John Pemberton invented Coca-Cola, adding cocaine, caffeine, sugar, and
     fruit extracts.

1888, George Eastman invented the first portable camera, the KODAK, costing $25.00. By 1900, it cost a dollar.

1893, the zipper was invented by Whitcomb Judson, but it took years to unseat the button as the preferred fastener, was adopted by the US Army for uniforms for soldiers in World War 1. [1i]

Prior to the 19th Century, most inventions that have enabled social change and progress have been either borrowed from other cultures or been fortuitous accidents. Now, for the first time in history, Europe and America had a class of idealistic entrepreneurs who set out to change the way people lived and became inventors by trade. They earned their livings and (some) made their fortunes by seeking out problems to solve.

In the medical world, the same mania for solving health issues transformed daily living for millions.

1867: Joseph Lister published *Antiseptic Principle of the Practice of Surgery,* and in one hospital that adopted these new principles of cleanliness, the death rate from infection fell from 60% to 4%.

Vaccines for communicable diseases began to appear.

1879: cholera

1881: anthrax

1882: rabies

1890: tetanus and diphtheria

1896: Typhoid fever

1897: effective medication for malaria--quinine

1897: plague[2]

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[1] http://www.enchantedlearning.com/inventors/1800b.shtml)

[2] http://www.factmonster.com/ipka/A0932661.html

This was a world in which daily newspapers carried weekly announcements of new discoveries in industry, public health, and commerce. It was not hard for their readers to envision a world in which the drudgery of hand work would soon be something in the past, and the diseases that had ravaged whole nations would soon disappear.

There were certainly problems—big problems. Disparities of opportunity and income were widespread. Native American nations were being dispossessed. But in spite of the suffering that was all too common, there was a sense at the turn of the century that all of these might be resolved by ingenuity, hard work, and investment. Here is a passage from Walter Lord's *The Good Years:*

"The *New York Times* on December 31, 1899, devoted nearly four editorial columns to a review of the Nineteenth Century. It proudly paraded the list of inventions—steam engines, railroads, telegraph, ocean liners, telephones, electric lights, even the cash register. They would pave the way for even greater advances. 'We step upon the threshold of 1900 which leads to the new century,' concluded the editorial, .facing a still brighter dawn of civilization.'

"Sunday sermons struck the same note. The Reverend Newell Dwight Hillis could scarcely contain himself: 'Laws are becoming more just, rulers humane, music is becoming sweeter and books wiser; homes are happier, and the individual heart becoming at once more just and more gentle.'

"No wonder hopes were high. From coast to coast, the country had never seen such good times. The Portland *Oregonian* called 1899 'the most prosperous year Oregon has ever known.' The Cheyenne *Sun-Leader* agreed: 'Never has a year been ushered in with more promise.' The Louisville *Courier-Journal:* 'Business in Louisville was never better, if as good.' The Boston *Herald* perhaps summed it up best with an interesting thought: 'If one could not have made money this past year, his case is hopeless.'

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"But prosperity was only part of the story. An endless stream of exciting discoveries offered concrete evidence of the abundant life ahead. The new X-ray

was revolutionizing surgery. Walter Reed's experiments might end yellow fever. The caterpillar tractor would lighten farm work. The gramophone and Pianola would bring joy to the home. Electricity promised untold wonders—not just lights but help on all sorts of household chores; some man had even invented a toaster.

"Best of all was the motorcar. Its growth had been phenomenal. On April 1, 1898, an adventuresome soul brought the first American machine ever made specifically for sale. By 1900 some eight thousand cars sputtered about the country. Over one hundred taxis graced the streets of New York; Chicago even had a motor ambulance."[3]

The Unexpected Catastrophe

"War is hell!" was Winston Churchill's famous comment. He had been in

the British military himself, a choice made by his father who deemed him too slow

to do anything else. But, like all of his fellow Brits, he had witnessed the horrors

of WW1. And unlike most of his companions, he saw another war coming, and the

vision was not pretty.

The Western Front of World War 1 is the focus of my attention today. This

was the closest in physical proximity to the cities of Western Europe and news

services to America. The German High Command had prepared for war on two

fronts, realizing that the alliance between France and Russia would put Germany in

the middle. The Schlieffen Plan developed for this possibility called for a quick

thrust into France to capture Paris before the Tsar's government could mobilize

their troops. That would knock France out of the war before much happened on

the Eastern Front.

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[3] Walter Lord, *The Good Years: From 1900 to the First World War*. Harper and Brothers, 1960, pp. 2-4

The plan to capture Paris in six weeks failed, largely because of a new weapon that had come into use since the last time the Germans tried this in 1871: the machine gun. I will return to this aspect of the war a little later. The only defense from this new gun was a trench—a defensive fortification that had been used ever since gunpowder came into use in the 14th century. By the end of the war, 12,000 miles of trenches filled a 50-mile wide corridor from the North Sea to the Swiss border 500 miles southeast.

What Germany, Britain, and France faced was a terrible four-year long war of attrition in this ad hoc system of 6-foot-deep trenches. This battle line did not change quickly. For the most part only a few yards at a time could be gained as one side would shell the opposing trench, then race across no-man's-land and jump into the enemy's trench to capture it.

Few made it, and the death toll was appalling. Let's take the British losses as an example. The French losses were even greater, but their statistics are much less useful. Of four million British troops that served on the Western Front, there were somewhat more than 1 million there in early 1916, and about 1.7 million in August, 1917. These troops came from various nationalities in the British Empire: 300,000 were from Australia, Canada provided 400,000, India 160,000, New Zealand 90,000, South Africa 30,000, and the rest from Great Britain.   Remember, there was constant turn-over as troops were killed, injured, or rotated off of the

Front. 43% of the British troops were killed, injured, or missing, 60% of the

Aussies, 53% of the Canadians, 52% of the New Zealanders, and 47% of the South

Africans. The average casualty count was around 50%. Remember that all troops

on the Western Front were not in the trenches—there were large numbers of

supporting contingents providing food, water, ammunition, and medical care. So

the chances of death or injury for those in the trenches were well above that 50%

figure. I could not find that statistic, and I won't dare to guess.

For British, French, and German troops, nearly a third of the dead were

never identified. A large percentage of the bodies of the missing were never

recovered. According to the records organized by the FirstWorldWar.com website,

Britain had 359,000 missing (one-third of the total losses, apart from the injured),

Austria-Hungary had 855,000 (just 100,000 less than the number of known dead),

and France had 360,000 never found, in addition to 1.4 million known dead.[4] Yet

all of these soldiers died in a 50-mile-wide swath of territory 500 miles long.

Doubtless most of these were buried in ad hoc, unmarked graves. Thousands of

others were blown to confetti by the incessant shelling. Both Germany and France

lost about 15% of their total male population during these four years.

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[4] http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/casualties.htm)

By comparison, U.S. losses in Vietnam were 58,220 (with an additional

59,000 South Vietnamese),[5] out of a total number of troops sent to Vietnam of 3.6

million.[6] There are today only 1,639 American troops listed as missing in action.[7]

This suggests the traumatic, chaotic conditions in the trenches.

Let's turn to personal accounts from the Western Front.

Frank Richards recorded in his diary,

"A good standing trench was about six foot deep, so that a man could walk
upright during the day in safety from rifle-fire. In each bay of the trench we
constructed fire-steps about two feet higher than the bottom of the trench, which
enable us to stand head and shoulders about the parapet. During the day we were
working in reliefs, and we would snatch an hour's sleep when we could, on a wet
and muddy fire-step, wet through to the skin ourselves.
"If anyone had to go to the company on our right in the daytime he had to
walk through thirty yards of waterlogged trench, which was chest deep in water in
some places."

Bruce Bairnsfather wrote of his first day in the trench early in the war.

"It was a long and weary night, that first one of mine in the trenches.
Everything was strange, and wet and horrid. First of all, I had to do and fix up my
machine guns at various points, and find places for the gunners to sleep in. This
was no easy matter, as many of the dugouts had fallen in and floated off
downstream.
"In this, and subsequent descriptions of the trenches, I may lay myself open
to the charge of exaggeration. But it must be remembered that I am describing
trench life in the early days of 1914. And I feel sure that those who had experience
of them will acquit me of any such charge.
"To give a recipe of getting a round idea, in case you want to, I recommend the
following procedure. Select a flat ten-acre ploughed field, so sited that all the
surface water of the surrounding country drains into it. Now cut a zig-zag slot

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[5] http://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html
[6] http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/01/world/vietnam-war-fast-facts/
[7] http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/summary_statistics/

about four feet deep and three feet wide diagonally across, dam off as much water as you can so as to leave about one hundred yards of squelchy mud; delve out a hole at one side of the slot, then endeavor to live there for a month on bully beef and damp biscuits, whilst a friend has instructions to fire at you with his Winchester every time you put your head about the surface."

August Hope recorded this entry in his diary.

"It was 9 A.M. and the so-called trench was full of corpses and all sorts of equipment. We stood and sat on bodies as if they were stones or logs of wood. Nobody worried if one had its head stuck through or torn off, or a third had gory bones sticking out though its torn coat. And outside the trench one could see them lying in every kind of position. There was one quite young little chap, a Frenchman, sitting in a shell-hole, with his rifle on his arm and his head bent forward, but he was holding his hands as if to protect himself, in front of his chest in which there was a deep bayonet wound. And so they lay, in all their different positions, mostly Frenchmen, with their heads battered in by blows from mallets and even spades, and all around rifles, equipment of all kinds and any number of kepis. The 154th had fought like furies in their attack, to revenge themselves for the shellfire.
"A heap of five corpses lay just this side of the barrier; we were constantly having to tread on them to try to squash them down in the mud, because, in consequences of that gunfire, we couldn't get them out of the trench. Our feeling gradually became quite blunted." [8]

As I mentioned in passing earlier, the cause of this stalemate was, primarily, the invention of the machine gun. There had been attempts since the introduction of gunpowder in the last Middle Ages to create a rapid-fire gun, but not until the invention of smokeless powder in the 1880s was such a weapon feasible. The first, in 1884, was invented by Hiram Stevens Maxim, and his gun was quickly followed by numerous others. All of them used the explosive gas from one discharge to

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[8] http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/life_treanches.htm)

remove the spent shell and introduce the next into the breech, making this gun truly automatic.[9]

The machine gun dominated World War 1, making the trenches both necessary and extraordinarily deadly. In the inevitable course of history, it seems that we always assume that the next war will be much like the last, and find to our horror that each war is the occasion for introducing new weapons from which we have difficulty defending ourselves. Such is the nature of war, and of evil.

The second deadly weapon used first in modern times in World War 1 was chemical warfare, in the form of mustard gas, chorine, and phosgene gas. Spread through grenades and artillery shells, the gases were used by both the Germans and the British. Possibly 100,000 deaths were caused by these chemical weapons during the war, and perhaps a million more since. Then there were tens of thousands who were permanently disabled. The outcome of the use of these chemical weapons was so horrible that most nations signed on to a treaty to make those weapons off limits in any future conflict. The first such agreement was signed in 1925, and a more comprehensive one in 1992. The extent of this popular and political reaction to the use of chemical weapons is an index to the revulsion that their use caused among the broader populations of Europe and America. [10]

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[9] http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/354633/machine-gun
[10] http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Chemical/

For the first time in history, the horrors of war entered the homes and lives of citizens not only through print, but more powerfully through photography and newsreels. While the media presence was nothing then like it is today, it did contribute a great deal to the impact of the war. The power of the gruesome scenes from the trenches can hardly be overestimated, as is suggested by the popular reaction to chemical weapons. It was not only the intelligentsia that was scandalized. Virtually every family in Germany, France, and Britain were directly affected by the war. It was, however, the well-educated who responded in print. Among the many voices raised in response to the war, we are going to consider those who called themselves Existentialists.

Existentialism

I commented earlier that many scholars link Existentialism to the atrocities of World War 2. I disagree, and will explain why in a moment. Existentialism was a post-World War 1 cultural movement that originated in France. Led by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus, the movement (or philosophy, perhaps) focused on the act of being. One of Sartre's more famous statements is, "Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance." [11]

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[11] http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/jeanpauls386569.html#rUVxuVs4Og0CXu3S.99

For the Existentialists life was an accident, being dealt a losing hand. There was nothing beyond being. There is no inherent goal or direction for living; good things accidently happen to bad people, and bad things just happen to good people—the terms "bad" and "good" were nothing more than social or religious constructs. Everything is merely accidental in an arbitrary world.

This challenge of being in such a pointless existence left the individual essentially alone. It was up to the individual to make a choice about how to act in this world, and to commit himself or herself to a course of action. Commitment to a course of action was a supreme act of self-will, creating a matrix of meaning for one's own self, independent of any other person.

Such an arbitrary commitment to a fabricated meaning was, for the Existentialists, frightening, depressing, and—liberating. "Existentialism posits that we are defined by how we act, not by how we are supposed to act, so to a great extent you choose who you want to be."[12]

To describe existentialism as a post-WW2 movement, it is, however, misleading. Sartre was born in 1905 in Paris, was nine when World War 1 broke out, a teenager when it ended. His higher education took place in the maelstrom of the 1920's and early 30's. He grew up in a world trying to deal with the apparent

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[12] http://www.wikihow.com/Understand-Existentialist-Philosophy

injustice, inhumanity, brutality, and confusion of post-war France. Simone de

Beauvoir was born in 1908 in a well-to-do family, and was educated at the

Sorbonne in Paris in the inter-war years. She was Sartre's companion for much of

their lives, though they never married. She became a popular novelist. One

popular novel, *L'Invitée* (*She Came To Stay*), published in 1943, "describes the

subtle destruction of a couple's relationship brought about by a young girl's

prolonged stay in their home; it also treats the difficult problem of the relationship

of a conscience to "the other," each individual conscience being fundamentally a

predator to another."[13] Note that she graduated from college in 1929, and published

an existentialist novel in the middle of WW2. Again, her formative years preceded

the atrocities of WW2.

Albert Camus was born in 1913, and started to school in 1918. Again his

most formative years preceded the outbreak of World War 2: Camus earned his

advanced degree in 1936. Marice Merleau-Ponty was born in 1908, and had his

advanced degree in 1931 (in the depth of the Great Depression).

Thus the most formative years of these Existentialists preceded WW2. I do

not intend in any way to argue that the Second World War was less beastly than

the first. There was plenty to disillusion any thinking man or woman in the latter

conflict: the blitzkrieg, the death camps, the wholesale bombing of civilian

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[13] http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/57762/Simone-de-Beauvoir

populations, the atomic bomb. But their disillusionment predated that war. They were the children of World War I.

Postmodernism

Existentialism was a way station on the path to a much larger reconfiguration of the intellectual universe that we call postmodernism. "Post" obviously refers to something after modernism, so we must understand a little about modernism before we can grasp the challenge of postmodernism. I will interrupt here with this caveat: there are many postmodernisms; each postmodernist offers a different scenario, and there is a great deal of contradiction among them. I am limiting our discussion here to one particular aspect that most postmodernists agree on. I can only scratch the surface in the few minutes I have left.

Encyclopedia Britannica has as succinct a definition as is possible: Postmodernism is, in Western philosophy, "a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power." [14]

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[14] http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1077292/postmodernism, ¶ 1

I must note that such a sharp, clear summary of postmodernism is in fact a modernist explanation. But I'll let it stand for our purposes. I want to zero in on one word in this definition above: *skepticism*. The Enlightenment understanding of reality (which is another name for modernism) held without question that, according to Brian Duignan, "the descriptive and explanatory statements of scientists and historians [and I would add, theologians] can, in principle, be objectively true or false."[15] Postmodern thinkers deny this. There is no Truth in the sense that any statement about the natural or supernatural spheres will be true in all cultures or circumstances. Neither is there a cohesive story or narrative that gives meaning and purpose to the life of the individual or the identity of the group or nation. Similar to Existentialism, there is nothing separate from the individual that actually exists. Nothing. Nada. Humans are alone with their own thoughts, and must make the best of it. After all, the modernist establishment of the West had used its "objective" knowledge, its "universally applicable" logic, its "infallible" reason, and "humane" ideologies to create better and more efficient ways of killing millions upon millions of human beings. Why would any thinking person buy a crock of absurdity like that?

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[15] http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1077292/postmodernism, ¶#1

This skepticism about knowledge, logic, and reason applies in particular to any grand narratives larger than the individual that give meaning to human life. They use the term *metanarrative* to identify these stories. One metanarrative that we are closely associated with is the Christian metanarrative: *God created the world as good, but humans rebelled. Human rebellion made the earth a terrible place, but God sent Jesus to take our sin and rebellion on himself to the Cross. His resurrection assures us that everything will someday be fully restored and through Him we have everlasting life. Christians serve as agents of God in this world.* To the secular postmodernist, that is utter foolishness because such stories are figments of human imagination.

Another metanarrative would be the national story of the United States*: The USA was born in the search, led by our theistic Founding Fathers, for freedom from tyranny. The Colonies fought and won a bitter war against overwhelming odds. Welcoming immigrants fleeing oppression from every corner of the world, our fathers conquered the wilderness and built a nation that stands for freedom and justice for all. We entered the World Wars to make the world a place where freedom and democracy can flourish.* Such metanarratives, according to the postmodernists, are self-serving rationalizations for greedy pursuit of power and wealth at the expense of the poor of the world.

The attack on metanarrative first by existentialism and then by postmodernism ultimately undermines meaning in human life. I hold that it is meaning that makes us human in the most fundamental sense of the term. We must have a purpose to be healthy. We collapse into darkness if we have no reason to get up in the morning. The responses of the existentialist and postmodernist are that we must manufacture a purpose for ourselves—to commit ourselves to some worthwhile endeavor to help suffering humankind, or to occupy our time making and hoarding money and stuff. It really makes no difference which we choose. To live only to satisfy some inner need for an imagined reality larger than ourselves will inevitably prove futile.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to mention the political and social context in which postmodernism functions today. This drive towards individual isolation and autonomy has a corrosive political impact on our world, as it does on individual wellbeing. Let me describe a mental image that Diarmaid MacCulloch used in his masterful book *The Reformation.*[16] He described the Medieval Church that had served to give meaning to Europeans for a thousand years as a massive and brilliantly crafted stained glass window. It was coherent, solid, and strong. Martin Luther challenged that paradigm with one unique idea: that every human could

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[16] Viking Penguin: New York. 2004

engage with God personally and directly. In fact, the only way to God was a personal relationship of faith. Imagine a small stone thrown through that window, leaving a small hole. At first, it appeared to be no big deal. But slowly an aura of small cracks begins to spread outward from that little hole, like the pattern that results when a stone hits the windshield of your car. Gaining speed, the cracks branched and branched again and again. Eventually the entire window was a mass of cracks, and the whole collapsed, never to be restored.

One of the internal inconsistencies that appeared as the Modernist paradigm matured was the political idea of the ultimate value of the nation-state. That idea had been growing since the 17th century, and it challenged the fabric of political and economic life on which the modern world was built. World War 1 was a series of confrontations among five empires: the British Empire, which survived the war, but only for a generation, and the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman Empires, which did not survive it. They all collapsed by the end of the war. The nation-state idea revealed its dark side: each and every nationality, no matter how small, deserved to be an independent state with its own story, identity, and right of self-determination. Today we are watching this process of disintegration continue: Spain, Italy, Great Britain, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, China, Russia, and others reveal either effect or possibility of fracture. World War 1 provided the stage on which the inner

tensions inherent in modernism were released. The splintering continues, and the paradigm will collapse completely. Someday, if the world stands, postmodernism will also shatter, undermined by inherent contradictions within and the radical emphasis on individual autonomy.

In the meantime, people of faith have a grand opportunity to provide an alternative to the meaninglessness that our age has accepted in place of the false certainties of modernism. If anything, postmodernism is more susceptible to authentic Christian witness and solidarity that Modernism was. The future is brighter than we sometimes think.