

Romantic Critiques of Industrial Technology

1. Welcome to our next video lecture on the co-evolution of religion and technology. In this lecture we shall survey religious, romantic critiques of industrial capitalism, as well as Christian movements that arose to address the pervasive social and cultural disruptions that followed in its wake.

The industrial revolution intensified that growing rationalization of modern society to an unprecedented degree. Industrial capitalism's relentless optimization of efficiency and utility, for all its material power and promise, threatened spiritual decline and psychological degeneracy. Romantics would resist the hegemony of rational objectivity by imaginatively extending interiority to all things. Scientific detachment and industrial power needed to be complemented where not substituted for altogether by a private, interior life of deep feeling and passionate emotion not only for humanity but for nature, indeed the cosmos as a whole. The world was not a machine; it was itself alive, indeed "waking up" to itself in us, through us and for us.

2. However with the rise of factory mass production, scores of laborers moved away from nature into the cities in search of a better life. In the Eighteenth century 90% of the population lived in the rural countryside. By the 1920's 90% lived in urban areas. However, factories could not keep up with demand and wages could be offered at a bare subsistence level.
3. Indeed Thomas Malthus notoriously argued that subsistence wages for the working class were inevitable, as higher wages would only increase the working population proportionately to restore the "natural" equilibrium
4. Furthermore as factories multiplied, smoke and smog turned city air into "pea soup." Even as medical science progressed, overcrowded tenements and scant public sanitation caused industrial epidemics of cholera, typhoid and tuberculosis.
5. Romantics, religious, literary and political would condemn and often despair over this new age. It was not the realization of a utopian dream but the metastasis of a dystopic nightmare.
6. Religious thought followed suit, indeed often led the charge. Evangelical revivals in both rural and urban contexts preached an individual salvation of religious rebirth to counter the mechanization of the assembly line.

7. Membership in institutional Christianity was not enough. One needed to *experience* salvation through being “born again” and making a personal commitment to Christ as one’s Lord and Savior.
8. Religious romantics, most notably Friedrich Schleiermacher, rejected the deist religion of reason in favor of a religion grounded in interior feeling and inchoate intuition. In contrast to the rational order and autonomy, held sacred by Enlightenment deists, the very essence of religion Schleiermacher now argued, lie in a feeling of one’s utter dependence, a sense of mystical union with the *hen kai pan*, the one and all.
9. Romanticism’s oppositional view of the relationship between technology and nature, the secular and the sacred finds evocative expression in a poem by the nineteenth century Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, entitled “God’s Grandeur:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

10. Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
 And all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil;
 And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

11. And, for all this, nature is never spent.
 There lives the dearest freshness, deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with oh! bright wings.

12. Hopkins reconnects to the sacred through the natural landscape without and in what he coins a thing’s individual “inscape” within. Concepts may define what a thing is but inscape, drawn from John Duns Scotus’ “haecetas” or “thisness” defines the thing’s individuality. Hopkins articulates this alterity relationship with all things in another poem:

13. As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each moral thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

I say more: the just man justices
Keeps grace, that keeps all his goings graces
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

14. In the new world, beginning in the late 1830's American Transcendentalism would revere the natural world as an (1) unmediated expression of original, divine creativity. Nature was not so much below human reason as above it, closer to the divine as a purer expression of God, unfiltered by human civilization.

15. In tapping into our own *inner* nature, and especially our imagination and its own creativity, we were both imitating the divine and joining God in completing his work of creation. In seeking to commune with nature, the American Transcendentalists would focus less on nature's beauty than on its sublimity, that is, not on the beautiful patterns to be found in meadows and landscapes but on the infinite power and grandeur expressed in mountain and waterfall, as well as the abundant wildlife, the vast forests and the expansive fertile plains of the "New" World, pristine, untouched by human civilization. Europe and Asia were spent, used up by thousands of years of human technology; America were fresh and pristine virgin wilderness.

16. Thus whereas wilderness had been seen in the "old" world as the realm of the demonic, calling for human domestication and rational subjugation, for the transcendentalists, the wilderness was transcendent, an unmediated expression of the creative, infinite divine will itself. For them, the sacred was to be found there, not only in our own wild inner world of feeling and desire, but also in wild nature without. Indeed a walk in the wild was the transcendentalist's sacred ritual for reconnecting to the sacred within, the individual's wild and raw authentic self.

17. Indeed, Christianities from across the confessional spectrum would push back against the social disruptions and dislocations induced by mass urbanization and mass production. Evangelicals organized urban revivalist crusades, offering religious resources for finding meaning, purpose and identity in an increasingly impersonal society. New Christian movements also arose such as the Salvation Army and the YMCA. The temperance movement swept the country as a response to workers' lives ruined by alcoholism and workers' families destroyed by the domestic violence, abandonment, even suicide that would follow in its wake. Evangelicalism also critiqued industrial laissez-faire economics through books such as *In His Steps*, in which a Christian business goes bankrupt and becomes a tramp after committing to run his company on Gospel principles, making business decisions on the basis of "What Would Jesus Do?"
18. So too Catholicism, once having lost its own papal states with the unification of Italy, turned to a sharp criticism of the modern economy, in both its capitalist and communist strains. In *Rerum Novarum* (literally "The New Things") Leo XII offered a nostalgic neo-feudal ideal of the traditional organic society where all parts of society, rather than dedicated to the singular pursuit of profit, cared for the others and worked for the common good of the whole. Wealth and poverty, no more than grace and salvation, were simply the results of one's own efforts. (1) The 40 hour work week, a minimum wage, the abolition of child labor as well as care for the homeless and support for labor unions were all justified in terms of the needs of religion and family life for the urban masses.
19. Finally, both evangelical and more "modern" mainstream Protestantism while embracing romantic "modernism" in theology would preach a "social gospel" critical of industrial capitalism's exploitation of the new working class.
20. In the twentieth century industrial mass production would gradually alleviate the destitution and misery of the early years of the industrial revolution. However Christian philosophers and religious thinkers soon became wary that this new affluence was also ultimately demonic in its own way. Mass production with its attendant mass marketing and mass media was creating a rising mass culture in which sensibilities were homogenized and trivialized. (1) In the name of individual fulfillment the masses were being spiritually consumed by their commodities. Advertisements portrayed

preternaturally happy, popular and successful characters, iconic individuals using their products in the hope that such apparently rich, meaningful lives would be associated with their brands. With commodities fetishized, consumer culture was itself becoming a rival religion.

21. Thus social critics, such as the philosophers of the Frankfurt School for Social Research, warned that the very success of industrial capitalism in producing unprecedented material prosperity for the masses was evacuating modern life of authentic meaning.
22. Neo-orthodox theologians preached that the Word of God comes not only to comfort the afflicted but to afflict the comfortable, to rouse mainstream affluent consumers from their spiritual complacency and awaken them to the urgency of decision for Christ and his cross over a culture of affluence