Tom Wolfe

THE GREAT RELEARNING

The twentieth century is over.

In 1968, in San Francisco, I came across a curious footnote to the psychedelic movement. At the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic there were doctors who were treating diseases no living doctor had ever encountered before, diseases that had disappeared so long ago they had never even picked up Latin names, diseases such as the mange, the grunge, the itch, the twitch, the thrush, the scroff, the rot. And how was it that they had now returned? It had to do with the fact that thousands of young men and women had migrated to San Francisco to live communally in what I think history will record as one of the most extraordinary religious experiments of all time.

The hippies, as they became known, sought nothing less than to sweep aside all codes and restraints of the past and start out from zero. At one point Ken Kesey organized a pilgrimage to Stonehenge with the idea of returning to Anglo-Saxon civilization's point zero, which he figured was Stonehenge, and heading out all over again to do it better. Among the codes and restraints that people in the communes swept aside—quite purposely—were those that said you shouldn't use other people's toothbrushes or sleep on other people's mattresses without changing the sheets or, as was more likely, without using any sheets at all or that you and five other people shouldn't drink from the same bottle of Shasta or take *tokes* from the same cigarette. And now, in 1968, they were relearning . . . the laws of hygiene . . . by getting the mange, the grunge, the itch, the twitch, the thrush, the scroff, the rot.

This process, namely the relearning—following a Promethean and unprecedented start from zero—seems to me to be the *leitmotif* of our current interlude, here in the dying years of the twentieth century.

"Start from zero" was the slogan of the Bauhaus School. The story of how the Bauhaus, a tiny artists' movement in Germany in the 1920s, swept aside the architectural styles of the past and created the glass-box face of the modern American city is a familiar one, and I won't retell it. But I should mention the soaring spiritual exuberance with which the movement began, the passionate conviction of the Bauhaus's leader, Walter Gropius, that by starting from zero in architecture and design man could free himself from the dead hand of the past. By the late 1970s, however, architects themselves were beginning to complain of the dead hand of the Bauhaus: the flat roofs, which leaked from rain and collapsed from snow, the tiny bare beige office cubicles, which made workers feel like component parts, the glass walls, which let in too much heat, too much cold, too much glare, and no air at all. The relearning is now underway in earnest. The architects are busy rummaging about in what the artist Richard Merkin calls the Big Closet. Inside the Big Closet, in promiscuous heaps, are the abandoned styles of the past. The current favorite rediscoveries: Classical, Secession, and Moderne (Art Deco).

Relearning on the wing, the architects are off on a binge of eclecticism comparable to the Victorian period's a century ago.

In politics the twentieth century's great start from zero was one-party socialism, also known as Communism or Marxism-Leninism. Given that system's bad reputation in the West today (even among the French intelligentsia), it is instructive to read John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*—before turning to Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. The old strike hall poster of a Promethean worker in a blue shirt breaking his chains across his mighty chest was in truth the vision of ultimate human freedom the movement believed in at the outset. For intellectuals in the West the painful dawn began with the publication of the *Gulag Archipelago* in 1973. Solzhenitsyn insisted that the villain behind the Soviet concentration-camp network was not Stalin or Lenin (who invented the term concentration camp) or even Marxism. It was instead the Soviets' peculiarly twentieth-century notion that they could sweep aside not only the old social order but also its religious ethic, which had been millennia in the making ("common decency," Orwell called it) and reinvent morality . . . here . . . now . . . "at the point of a gun," in the famous phrase of the Maoists. Today the relearning has reached the point where even ruling circles in the Soviet Union and China have begun to wonder how best to convert Communism into something other than, in Susan Sontag's phrase, Successful Fascism.

The great American contribution to the twentieth century's start from zero was in the area of manners and mores, especially in what was rather primly called "the sexual revolution." In every hamlet, even in the erstwhile Bible Belt, may be found the village brothel, no longer hidden in a house of blue lights

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or red lights or behind a green door but openly advertised by the side of the road with a thousand-watt back-lit plastic sign: TOTALLY ALL-NUDE GIRL SAUNA MASSAGE AND MARATHON ENCOUNTER SESSIONS INSIDE. Up until two years ago pornographic movie theaters were as ubiquitous as the Seven-Eleven, including outdoor drive-ins with screens six, seven, eight storeys high, the better to beam all the moistened folds and glistening nodes and stiffened giblets to a panting American countryside. Two years ago the pornographic theater began to be replaced by the pornographic videocassette, which could be brought into any home. Up on the shelf in the den, next to the set of *The Encyclopedia Brittanica* and the great books, one now finds the cassettes: *Shanks Akimbo, That Thing with the Cup.* My favorite moment in Jessica Hahn's triumphal tour of Medialand this fall came when a ten-year-old girl, a student at a private school, wearing a buttercup blouse, a cardigan sweater, and her school uniform skirt, approached her outside a television studio with a stack of *Playboy* magazines featuring the famous Hahn nude form and asked her to autograph them. With the school's blessing, she intended to take the signed copies back to the campus and hold a public auction. The proceeds would go to the poor.

But in the sexual revolution, too, the painful dawn has already arrived, and the relearning is imminent. All may be summed up in a single term, requiring no amplification: AIDS.

The Great Relearning—if anything so prosaic as remedial education can be called great—should be thought of not as the end of the twentieth century but the prelude to the twenty-first. There is no law of history that says a new century must start ten or twenty years beforehand, but two times in a row it has worked out that way. The nineteenth century began with the American and French revolutions of the late eighteenth. The twentieth century began with the formulation of Marxism, Freudianism, and Modernism in the late nineteenth. And now the twenty-first begins with the Great Relearning.

The twenty-first century, I predict, will confound the twentieth-century notion of the Future as something exciting, novel, unexpected, or radiant; as Progress, to use an old word. It is already clear that the large cities, thanks to the Relearning, will not even look new. Quite the opposite; the cities of 2007 will look more like the cities of 1927 than the cities of 1987. The twenty-first century will have a retrograde look and a retrograde mental atmosphere. People of the next century, snug in their Neo-Georgian apartment complexes, will gaze back with a ghastly awe upon our time. They will regard the twentieth as the century in which wars became so enormous they were known as World Wars, the century in which technology leapt forward so rapidly man developed the capacity to destroy the planet itself—but also the capacity to escape to the stars on space ships if it blew. But above all they will look back upon the twentieth as the century in which their forebears had the amazing confidence, the Promethean *hubris*, to defy the gods and try to push man's power and freedom to limitless, god-like extremes. They will look back in awe . . . without the slightest temptation to emulate the daring of those who swept aside all rules and tried to start from zero. Instead, they will sink ever deeper into their Neo-Louis bergeres, content to live in what will be known as the Somnolent Century or the Twentieth Century's Hangover. □

The non-issue in Alaska

Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) has in recent months been much shrouded in controversy. Much of this controversy has centered on whether a relatively small portion of these lands—1.5 million acres along the Beaufort Sea Coastal Plain, out of a total of 19 million acres—should be opened to oil exploration.

One of the latest salvos fired by the anti-development forces came in the form of a letter to an influential newspaper by a spokesman for an environmental group. The letter makes a couple of statements worthy of examination.

First, the writer states that there is "only a 19 percent chance of finding any oil at all in the Arctic refuge." But even at those odds—and taking risks is what the oil business is all about—the coastal plain represents the best hope for a major onshore oil strike in the United States. In fact, within the context of risks the oil industry usually faces in wildcat areas, those odds are actually rather attractive. The coastal plain site is less than 100 miles from the Prudhoe Bay field. If oil is found in the plain, according to Interior Department data, it could represent between 600 million and 9.2 billion barrels. The point is, we'll never know unless we drill.

The letter also argues that if oil is discovered in the Arctic refuge, "we will not be able to extract all of that oil, given current technology." That's got to be the silliest anti-development argument ever raised; all the oil in any field is never fully recovered. Drilling would never occur anywhere if it became conditional on whether 100 percent of the oil could be produced. Moreover, the Interior Department's coastal plain estimates are for recoverable oil. And constant improvements are being made in secondary and tertiary recovery methods; fields are yielding more and more of the oil as technology advances.

Dubious quibbles aside, the basic argument for development remains cogent, simple, and pressing. Any oil found in the coastal plain, or anywhere else in the U.S., would be more than welcome. Oil imports are rising and domestic production is falling. Prudhoe Bay itself, the largest field in the U.S. at 10 billion barrels, has been producing for 10 years. It is currently producing at a peak rate of about 1.5 million barrels a day—about a fifth of U.S. production—but will soon enter its inevitable period of decline. The real issue in Alaska is whether or not America should maximize its economic domestic oil and gas production to reduce the nation's dependence on foreign oil and its negative balance of payments—and do so in an environmentally acceptable manner.

What about the environment? Would it truly be despoiled, as the environmentalists state, if drilling were to take place?

A major issue environmentalists raise concerns Alaskan wildlife. Of all the animal species in the area, Secretary Hodel cited the caribou as the most likely to be affected. But Senator Frank H. Murkowski of Alaska has pointed out that the caribou herd has, in fact, quadrupled at Prudhoe Bay during the oil development years, and since construction of the Alaskan pipeline. Indeed, the caribou herd thrives in the area of the pipeline, in spite of dire warnings to the contrary.

Still, the acreage under discussion does include the calving grounds. Can the caribou adapt? Senator Murkowski has discussed the issue with a university scientist who has been working with caribou herds for many years. His conclusion, according to the Senator: If oil development were to occur near their usual calving grounds, the caribou would simply move a mile or so away.

The controversy over the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge fills us with feelings of déjà vu. The same anti-development arguments were raised in the '60s and '70s, first over drilling at Prudhoe Bay, and later over the construction of the pipeline. We had hoped these questions were settled once and for all; to raise them now is really to raise non-issues.

The energy and economic future of the nation are too important to be sidetracked by non-issues. Oil exploration in Alaska should proceed because the national interest requires it. The arguments against development, when considered against the nation's needs, seem to fall under the weight of both past experience and expert scrutiny.

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George Gilder

THE MESSAGE OF THE MICROCOSM

A computerized world economy does not care about budget deficits or trade imbalances or national borders.

"Listen to the technology," urges Carver Mead of the California Institute of Technology, "find out what it is telling you."

It is a difficult counsel. The technology of today is entwined in science and speaks in tongues. Within the pentecostal chorus, minor prophets prate of nuclear winter and acid rain, viral plagues and carcinogenic plastics; *Scientific American*, transcending mere science, discovers the United States as a fount of worldwide hunger and poverty; more than half the physicists at Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, Berkeley, Dartmouth, and Stanford, among other centers of enlightenment, have pledged to boycott all efforts to thwart enemy missile attacks on their country; and Lester Thurow, the leading economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, delphically affirms "The Great Depression of 1990" as foretold in the cycle theory of an Indian mystic.

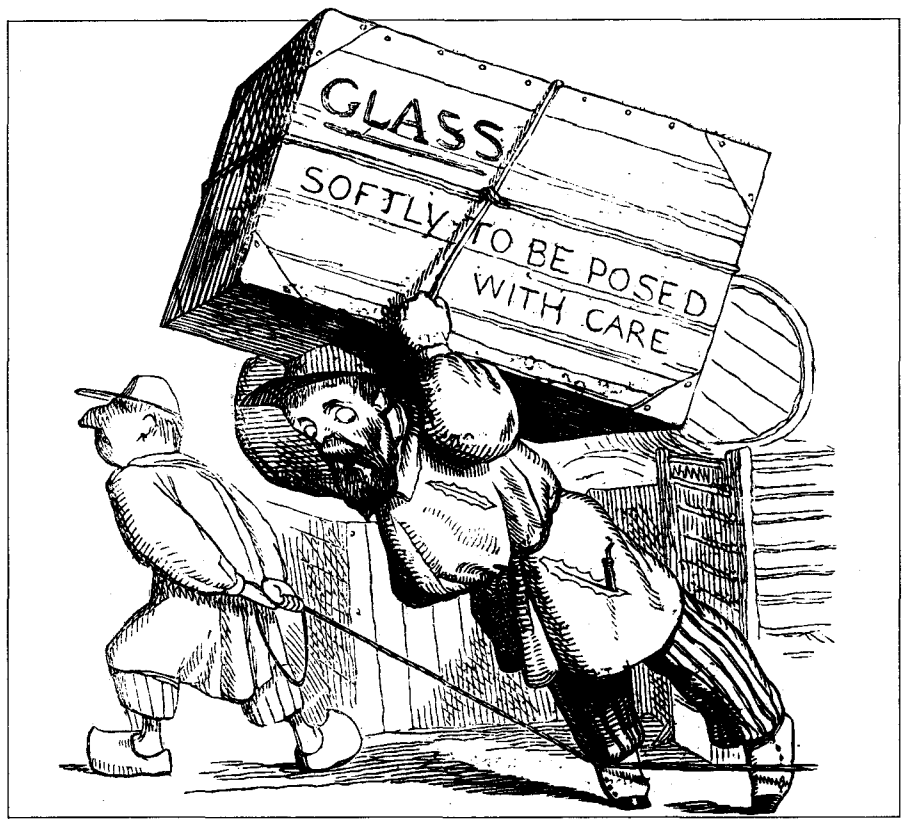
The experts seem to know a lot about the big bang and the spin on the Strange Quark, but not much about the cough in the carburetor or cause of the baby's headache, or about the differences between men and women, or whether the world is getting warmer or colder, or both. A few months ago astrophysicists discovered, "in nearby galaxies," black holes many times larger than the sun. These huge maws, unaccountably missed until now, might seem to symbolize the current state of scientific knowledge. Meanwhile the computer is down and the programmer is out to lunch with a Sandinista. That amid such disheartening confusions many researchers claim to have fathomed the origins of the universe and the death of God, bespeaks an awesome faith indeed.

It is understandable that many of us relegate it all to a black box, or a pastel panel, and continue to describe events in the old lore and languages, emblazoned with the old headlines. Listen to the technology? It is simpler to listen to the evening news, to watch the old world still reassuringly on stage, full of sound and fury, puffed up with mythic power and menace.

"YANK TROOPS MOVE UP SIX MILES," the New York *Herald Tribune* blared in my youth, and I could understand the message: the gridiron vision of Korea as territory at stake. Now the troops move on murkier grids, but no one doubts the underlying metaphor of territorial contest. Angola, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Iran, South Africa are the new arenas for capture the flag and they can be made to fit in the old dramaturgy.

"YANK SCIENTISTS SHRINK MEMORY CELL TO SIX MICRONS"—putting thousands of switches on a spot of silicon no wider than the wing of a flea—seems a less gripping and relevant drama. There is a vague awareness of the possibility of new and more portable gadgets, a vague fear of a threat to existing jobs and industries, a vague sense of both danger and promise. But few people comprehend that the microcosm of modern electronics is transvaluing all the things of the world, transforming all the landmarks, vitiating most of the academic disciplines. Protected by ignorance and nostalgia, the media and the politicians continue measuring miles in Namibia rather than microns in matter as the crux to the future of the globe.

Economics, sociology, geopolitics, art, religion all provide powerful tools that have sufficed for centuries to explain the essential surfaces of life. To many observers, there seems nothing truly new under the sun—no need for a deep understanding of man's new tools—no requirement to descend into the microcosm of modern electronics in order to comprehend the world. The world is all too much with us.



Nonetheless, studying economics and other social sciences, I began to realize that the old disciplines were breaking down, the familiar categories slipping away. An onslaught of technological progress was reducing much of economic and social theory to gibberish. For example, such concepts as land, labor, and capital, nation and society—solemnly discussed in every academic institution as if nothing had changed—have radically different meanings than before and drastically different values. Yet the vendors of old expertise continue on as if nothing had happened.

Laws get passed, editorials written, speeches delivered, soldiers dispatched, for all the world as if we still traveled in clipper ships and communicated chiefly by mail.

Jeane Kirkpatrick, for example, gave a speech, quoted respectfully in the *Wall Street Journal*, in which she said it was impossible to understand what is going on in the world without a comprehension of geography, "an idea of where things are." It is a common notion. It leads to such statements, portentously delivered, as: "Cuba is 90 miles south of Florida; the Middle East is a strategic hub; the Cape of Good Hope is a geopolitical choke point." Visit the Pentagon, or the *New York Times*, and everywhere there are maps, solemnly defining national borders and sovereign territories. No one shows any signs of knowing that we no longer live in geographic time and space, that the maps of nations are fully as obsolete as the charts of a flat earth, that geography tells us virtually nothing of interest about where things are in the real world.

The worldwide network of satellites and fiber optic cables, linked to digital computers, television terminals, telephones and databases, sustain worldwide markets for information, currency and capital on line 24 hours a day. Boeing 747s constantly traversing the oceans foster a global community of

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