Chapter 29: The Pursuit of Utopia: 
Civil Society in the Twentieth Century

I. The Context of Atrocities
   A. Atrocities
      1. The twentieth century was dominated by wars and atrocities on a previously unimaginable scale. The commission of these killings was aided by propaganda, the dehumanization of “enemies,” utopian visions, and the industrialization of killing.
      2. Civilization, education, and military discipline were no antidote for barbarism. Germany and Japan, countries with well-educated and civilized populations, committed terrible and horrific acts that killed millions in death camps, hideous medical experimentation, or as slave laborers. In Europe, Jews were singled out for annihilation (about 6 million died), and millions of others also died for their beliefs, ethnic backgrounds, and physical handicaps. Average citizens participated in the slaughter in the belief that their victims were subhuman and that they were in the process of creating utopias that had no room for lesser souls. Such actions should not surprise, given recent outrages by American soldiers in Iraq.

II. The Encroaching State
   A. The Encroaching State
      1. During the twentieth century, the state grew in size and scope and consumed more of the national budget as well as took greater responsibility for social welfare. States increasingly intervened in what had been previously private matters and also worked to alleviate the crippling effects of economic downturns, such as the Great Depression. The enormity of the Second World War increased the regimentation of society and the trend toward collectivism. Industry in the United States was heavily directed from Washington; Britain and Canada developed command economies. In some countries, rationing of goods became heavier after the war than during it. Many Western countries nationalized major industries and utilities.

      1. In the areas of medicine and education, this trend is clearest. Immunization programs were mandated; health education changed people’s habits—to the point where smoking (a common activity for more than half the century) was turned into a pariah activity. The state became more involved in paying doctors and operating hospitals, and most developed some form of national health care. In education, publicly financed education exploded at all levels. Ideally education would create solid citizens with an appreciation for life and knowledge of their heritage; most saw it as a means to a better life.
      2. The development of “big government” was least in the United States. Americans took seriously their aversion to government intrusion. In other countries, especially in Scandinavia, state regulation and taxation was far greater with greater social benefits. However, the suicide rates in these countries were high and some blamed this on the lack of individual initiative allowed. American prosperity perhaps suggested that it had the better way.
3. Planners’ assumptions were naïve; societies and economies are chaotic. Even most nominally socialist governments gave up their Five-Year Plans by the 1980s and 1990s. Only a few states like North Korea persisted in rigid central planning.

4. Bureaucracies, however, continued to grow. With growing problems like crime, poverty, and terrorism, the need for state assistance continued and increased.

Public spending accounted for a quarter of the Gross Domestic Product of the world’s seven wealthiest countries and by the end of the century that amount had grown to 37 percent. Technology also enabled the state to become more intrusive. Certain state programs like Britain’s National Health Service and American Social Security came to be seen as “sacred” by a wide majority. How to pay for it all remained a problem.

III. Unplanning Utopia: The Turn Toward Individualism

A. Unplanning Utopia

1. In seeking answers, some turned toward individualism, while others sought a “third way” that would encompass both social solidarity and individual prosperity. Marxists argued that this conservative shift was economically determined by the growing importance of service industries at the expense of manufacturing in the West and the rise of information technology. This has, in Marxist terms, created a new “knowledge class” and changed the collective psychology of society to a world without any ideology other than personal self-interest.

1. Another factor in the change was inflation. With higher government spending, the cash supply increased dramatically and with it increased prices. Generational gaps also affected this change, particularly as the children of the post-World War Two “baby boom” grew up and rejected their parents’ wartime solidarity for libertarianism, existentialism, or just plain self-indulgence.

2. In extreme cases young rebels turned to violence in the West, and especially in Latin America. This led to a reaction by the authorities that sometimes became highly repressive and bloody, but no revolutions resulted. In the communist world, these movements were sometimes manifested in nearly successful rebellions (Prague in 1968) or were deflected (the Cultural Revolution in China). By the 1980s, the pendulum swung to the right again. Family relationships changed with the general adoption of more liberal attitudes towards sex, individualism, and divorce. The divorce rate surged, more children were born out of wedlock, and even families that remained intact spent less time together. Rapid urbanization and the worldwide spread of Western culture created generation gaps everywhere. Change set off chain reactions everywhere.

IV. Counter-Colonization and Social Change

A. Counter-Colonization

1. Cheap transportation and the rising wealth of the West attracted long-range migrations of people seeking to escape poverty, wars, and political instability.
As birthrates in Western countries declined, these migrants filled the labor gap.

2. This movement of peoples followed on the heels of decolonization with many of the newcomers moving to the old imperial states. As time progressed, the movement became more general. Communities of widely different cultures adapted to one another and tensions rose. Racism became socially unacceptable in the West and the pseudo-science of the nineteenth century that justified racism was debunked. The dismantling of the legacy of racism that began in the post-war West has remained a work in progress. In the United States, the Civil Rights Movement achieved remarkable breakthroughs; in 1961 Australia ended its “white Australia” policy and allowed others to immigrate; even apartheid in South Africa came to an end in the early 1990s.

1. New forms of black identity arose with movements that treated black languages, literature, art, music, and religion as equal to any other. Some sought a return to Africa and saw black culture as superior, such as Malcolm X. New Afrocentrist movements also arose that sought to argue that Blacks were a lost tribe of Israel (Nation of Islam) or that Western civilization had really begun in Africa.

2. The cultural impact was enormous: foods, languages, religions, and every form of cultural exchange could be found in the cities of the West. Whites, too, were affected, from their interests in Eastern religions, philosophies, and political ideas to their artistic, literary, and culinary tastes. Relativism replaced Western cultural superiority. This has led to tension, especially where Eastern and Western cultural norms conflict. Most countries adopted, at least in word, the Western notion of equal treatment under the law. The status of women was more difficult. The role of women changed dramatically in the West after the First World War: women gained the vote, broke out of strict domesticity, and entered the work force (though the challenges of pay and promotion were and continue to be tremendous). Some non-Western countries have joined this movement, but others have retained traditional restrictions on women.

The new multiracial societies of the West have created new fundamental questions about integration and multiculturalism, about how to balance freedom and the needs of society to have commonalities.

V. Globalization and the World Economy

A. The Economy

1. Growing trade increased economic interdependence with companies operating internationally. The benefits were increased prosperity and greater cultural exchange; the downside was a few companies centered in the West that perpetuated the “business imperialism” of the past.

2. Some economies in East and Southeast Asia have shown themselves capable of becoming as rich as Western economies. Japan is an exemplary case (world’s second-largest economy since the late 1960s), as is South Korea, and China is fast becoming one (estimated to become the world’s largest economy by 2020). By the late 1980s, the Pacific had displaced the Atlantic as the world’s major commercial arena.
Other areas, like Latin America and Africa, have fallen behind through economic mismanagement under authoritarian regimes and because of high debts. Some bright spots are in Chile, Brazil, and South Africa.

Some have argued that the global economy is complex and, thus, fragile. The U.S. stock market crash in 1929 began a worldwide depression, but the later crash in 1987 had less severe ramifications. Even the tragic terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 had only limited impact on the markets.

VI. Culture and Globalization

A. Culture

1. By the end of the century, information was freer and more accessible than trade. With the progress of technology, communication and the exchange of information has increased dramatically worldwide. While the Internet has spurred this, it has also narrowed the focus of many and led others into trivial entertainment.

2. The Internet also spurred the development of global culture, but many feared this really meant the triumph of American popular culture and consumerism or a system that values consumption and possession more highly than social obligation, spirituality, or morality. Part of this battle is a concern for the environment and also a moral battle against alcohol, tobacco, and the consumption of addictive drugs. Another part condemned American culture as simply trivial and trashy.

3. However, many onlookers became admirers: the global appeal of American English for business, politics, science, and study. For thousands of years human languages have proliferated; now the trend has reversed.

Some new faiths offered themselves for psychological as well as spiritual healing. Others were clearly political, such as the Buddhist Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan. Scientology refers to itself as a church, but in some countries it has been identified either as a business or political organization.

VII. Secularism and Religious Revival

A. Secular and Religious

1. Most twentieth-century utopian visions were secular. Religion faced challenges from governments, popular culture, and skepticism. However, some societies reacted by becoming more religious, as happened in Egypt. In Iran the secular, pro-Western regime of the Shah collapsed at the hands of a movement led by the Shiite cleric Ayatollah Khomeini.

2. In Western Europe religion did decline, but traditional religions have endured; in the United States religion has not only remained strong but grown. Many Christian denominations, Islamic and Buddhist movements have self-reformed to confront secularism and to widen their appeal. Indeed, a growing number of “personal” religions and cults have provided a greater challenge to traditional faiths than atheism.

3. The twentieth century saw the rise of rootless spiritual movements, such as the “New Age” movement that began in the 1960s with its foundations in
astrology. Near the end of the century there was also a brief series of millennial cults.

4. Fundamentalism has been much more popular in its militancy, hostility to pluralism, and determination to mix politics and religion. Most fundamentalists (regardless of faith) made compromises with the world, but hardcore minorities see themselves at war with society at large. Once in power, fundamentalist regimes abuse members of other faiths, as has happened in Iran, in Afghanistan under the Taliban, and in Guatemala in the early 1980s when a Christian fundamentalist general seized power.

Other religious movements have gained popularity by promising followers health and prosperity (as the “Full Gospel Church” in South Korea and the Soko Gakkai, a Buddhist movement that even has its own political party in Japan). In the United States, worshippers at the Crystal Cathedral believed that business success was a mark of divine election.

VIII. In Perspective: The Century of Paradox
The twentieth century was a time of rapid change. Population rose dramatically, politics was transformed, the economy became global, religion was reformed, and societies shifted. Many countries in the West have become populated with people from many cultures, which sometimes have incompatible views that make the pluralism inherent in democracy difficult. However, it is only through pluralism and a respect for human rights that such societies can exist.

A great challenge in this regard is the value of the right to life. Many countries have outlawed capital punishment, but not the majority of the United States. In many jurisdictions, unborn babies were not included as protected lives. Euthanasia has become another focus of concern over the limits of human rights. The attempted utopias all failed. We wait to see what will replace them.