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## Naturalism and civilization (1927-1947)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the specific shift in the meaning of “civilization” that took place in texts and documents of early American philosophical naturalism. Particularly, it will focus on the specific role that naturalization plays in the edification of a newly secularized, science-oriented, and democratic society, as well as of a naturalized conception of culture and civilization. Indeed, as the work of many philosophers and intellectuals of the Forties highlights, naturalism represents not only the banner of a new idea of civilization, but at the same time becomes the symbol of a powerful postwar ideology.

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## 1. Introduction

Early American philosophical naturalism is more than a philosophical movement. It is also - and in some ways primarily - a cultural phenomenon with wide social, political, and cultural ramifications.<sup>1</sup> Philosophical debates on naturalism evolved in tandem with the secularization of American society in the late 19th century. The naturalization of religion, morality and philosophy played a critical role in forging a “manifest image” of the nation, the counterpart of which was characterized by the social and historical processes that were meanwhile unfolding with great rapidity. These processes, running in parallel, served as mutually reinforcing trajectories that cultivated a new American civic identity, alternative, and in some ways antagonistic to the canonical Western European tradition.

Early American philosophical naturalism is thus integral to a broad and multifaceted historical process. It intersects with a spectrum of disciplines extending beyond philosophy and the natural sciences to embrace psychology and various social sciences, including history, cultural anthropology, and sociology. It is an event that from a certain point onwards transcends the narrow boundaries of the academy and takes on the characteristics of a cultural phenomenon so pervasive and impactful that it shapes a new idea of civilization: this is the main thesis I will try to prove in the following lines, analyzing texts, documents and debates of the interwar period (my analysis will extend to the threshold of the Cold War).

Quite surprisingly, the broader social, cultural, and historical implications of the debates within early American philosophical naturalism have not garnered widespread attention among scholars, save for a few notable exceptions.<sup>2</sup> This lack of interest is all the more relevant since in the debates of the time, the idea that naturalism represents something new in relation to traditional European philosophical and cultural models emerges clearly, and precisely because of its socially transformative impact. The naturalist

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debate concerns not only the arena of epistemology, but that of liberal, democratic society and its associated ethical virtues. Naturalism is thus, in the voice of its own interpreters, a new form of civilization and, at the same time, a redefinition of the very concept of the “West”.

Needless to say, to speak of naturalism also means to refer to humanism, pragmatism, realism and, in general, to all the major trends of the early twentieth-century American philosophy. Indeed, it is well-known that the topic of progeny and sub-classifications is extremely fluid when it comes to naturalisms (some branches of naturalism, for instance, are more intertwined with phenomenology than with pragmatism). But all this is part of a general context which, however essential, I will be leaving in the background, for it seems to me that in recent decades it has been sufficiently unpacked by scholars.

What is important to note, however, is that naturalism carries with it a somewhat teleological and presentist conception of history, which becomes distinctly ideological during the Cold War era. The formation of a manifest image founded on the interrelated concepts of democracy as an ethical norm, scientific-oriented practices, and individual liberty, positioned the nation to assert itself globally as a bastion of freedom, untethered to totalitarianism, ideological bias, or supernatural and messianic beliefs—elements that contributed to the catastrophe of World War II. But this attitude made also possible to shield, under the seemingly neutral blanket of the naturalization (understood as an irreversible historical-scientific process), the real geopolitical ambitions pursued by the U.S. administration.<sup>3</sup> The onset of the Cold War, therefore, represents a kind of completion of this trajectory: from being a liberation philosophical and cultural movement aimed at the construction of a new progressive and liberal civic identity, naturalism ends up taking on the features of a powerful cultural ideology, capable of both preserving and exporting a new naturalized conception of civilization, which in the meantime had superimposed itself on the traditional European one.<sup>4</sup>

In the subsequent sections, I shall delineate the crucial phases of the intricate interplay between historical events and intellectual thought. But before analyzing the specific topic of the relationship between naturalism and civilization as it was developing in the interwar period, I would like to briefly answer a preliminary question: what do we mean when we talk about “civilization”? And more precisely: what was the manifest idea of “the West” during the interwar years? From a methodological point of view, in fact, it is quite relevant to understand the pragmatics of the term in the years we are going to analyze.

## 2. The “self-consciousness of the west”

What do we talk about when we talk about civilization? To sketch out a tentative answer I would take my starting point from some considerations made by Norbert Elias in the first volume of his book *The Civilizing Process* (1939). The reference to Elias is useful for three reasons: 1) as a matter of chronological contiguity to the texts of the American authors we will consider below; 2) to understand what the term civilization is meant to signify; 3) because of a quite telling omission: when Elias talks about the concept of civilization, he never mentions the United States. It is from this apparent forgetfulness that my analysis will begin.

Let us begin with definitions:

The concept of “civilization” refers to a wide variety of facts: to the level of technology, to the type of manners, to the development of scientific knowledge, to religious ideas and customs. It can refer to the type of dwelling or the manner in which men and women live together, to the form of judicial punishment, or to the way in which food is prepared.<sup>5</sup>

As we note, many things. Perhaps too many to summarise them in a simple way. And in fact, Elias offers us a functional definition that helps us understand the purpose of this notion - and to whom it refers:

But when one examines what the general function of the concept of civilization really is, and what common quality causes all these various human attitudes and activities to be described as civilized, one starts with a very simple discovery: this concept expresses the self-consciousness of the West.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of civilization would thus represent the self-image that the West has developed throughout its history. It would be a concept that performs an identity function for it provides a common name for a plurality of different behaviours and traditions.

By this term Western society seeks to describe what constitutes its special character and what it is proud of: the level of *its* technology, the nature of *its* manners, the development of *its* scientific knowledge or view of the world, and much more.<sup>7</sup>

We can assume that when Elias speaks of Western society he is referring primarily to Europe. From his point of view, the concept-construction refers to a historical genesis that is rooted in the political, social, and cultural transformations of modern Europe. Indeed, he invites us to carefully distinguish the different meanings that the word “civilization” holds in different European nations and to reflect on the subtle differences that invest the terms “civilization” and “culture”. While in England and France such a concept denotes “their pride in the significance of their own nations for the progress of the West and of mankind”, in Germany the same term had a different meaning. The idea here is that the concept of civilization only captures an outward characteristic of behaviour (that was rooted in the forms of that self-controlled behaviour that was practised in the grand European courts), whereas culture denotes an inner spiritual performance, rooted in the soil of study and education (and, as such, it represented the keyword of the German bourgeoisie of the 17th and 18th centuries).

“Civilization” and “culture” thus represent in Elias’ analyses two terms that are only seemingly overlapping, because they are actually antithetical in so far as they express significant historical-geographical, as well as socio-institutional differences. To the civilization/culture duality, understood as a kind of fault line in the history of modern Europe, Elias devotes the entire first part of his monumental 1939 work.

But for now, let us leave aside these subtle terminological differences and focus upon the United States. We were just saying that, generally speaking, such an idea of a “self-consciousness of the West” expresses an European-oriented concept. In Elias’ analyses, in fact, the United States is hardly ever mentioned. And it is not just the fact that the United States had not historically contributed to the construction of the word, but rather that in the pragmatics of its contemporary uses American culture and influence didn’t seem to play any role. But this is a particularly intriguing point, because in those very years in the United States there was much discussion on culture and on civilization, both in anthropological studies (Boas, 1938; Kroeber, 1917)<sup>8</sup> as well as in the philosophical field, and it is particularly valuable to find out what perspectives were developing on the other side of the Atlantic.

### 3. A Plea for speculative audacity

Roughly in the same years as Elias was composing his book John Dewey signed an article entitled *The Rôle of Philosophy in the History of Civilization* (Dewey, 1927). In it we find many interesting topics, plus a sort of indirect confirmation of Elias’s main thesis. The United States, Dewey claims, has not yet forged a self-image that is representative of its national consciousness and that signalizes its cultural autonomy from the traditional European models. There have been philosophical ideas, even important ones, there has been art and literature, a tremendous scientific progress, great advances in psychology and social sciences, but all of this did not produce a transformative cultural synthesis. The ideas of the few, Dewey adds, did not become “leading ideas”, in the sense of something that could be collectively shared.

Dewey asks himself what the root of this cultural deficit is, and his answer reads as follows:

What is the matter? It lies, I think, with our lack of imagination in generating leading ideas. Because we are afraid of speculative ideas, we do, and do over and over again, an immense amount of dead, specialized work in the region of “facts”. We forget that facts are only data; that is, are only fragmentary, uncompleted meanings, and unless they are rounded out into complete ideas - ... - they are helpless as are all maimed things and as repellent as are needlessly thwarted ones.<sup>9</sup>

Lots of facts, thus, and few leading ideas. Much attention to data, to science, but little aptitude toward speculative syntheses. Which, by the way, is itself a culturally relevant testimony, but not in the sense that Dewey advocates. Indeed, his thesis is that philosophical knowledge has an intrinsic connection with the history of civilization. Philosophy, he claims, is not only a theoretical knowledge, but is also a historical process endowed with an intrinsic cultural value and, as such, it has always shaped the form of any given civilization:

there is no specifiable difference between philosophy and its role in the history of civilization. Discover and define some characteristic, some unique, function in civilization, and you have defined philosophy itself.<sup>10</sup>

The strongest feature of the Deweyan thesis is that the great philosophical systems do not just *describe* the form of a given civilization, but rather *express in themselves* the visible trait of it. And reciprocally: if we analyse the characteristics of a certain type of civilization, we automatically also confront the philosophical ideas that formed its backbone. The great Scholastic systems, to say, mirrored the social structure as well as the anthropological features of the age. And in reverse, the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) helps us understand the profound political significance of the concept of harmony in Leibniz's philosophy.

Of course, this applies not only to philosophy, but also to art, architecture, science, and all manifestations of human spirit. In the case of philosophy, however, there is something special at work:

Philosophies which emerge at distinctive periods define the larger patterns of continuity which are woven in effecting the longer enduring junctions of a stubborn past and an insistent future. Philosophy thus sustains the closest connection with the history of culture, with the succession of changes in civilization.<sup>11</sup>

Philosophical systems make explicit those patterns of continuity that hold past and present together. That is, they critically filter out those trend lines, not necessarily visible to most, which become the essential texture of that future that is pressing at the threshold of the present. Philosophy somehow preforms patterns of transition, reflexively combining persistence and innovation.

In the United States, however, this still does not happen. Although art, literature and philosophy have been widely developed, "American civilization", Dewey says, fails to give an "imaginative formulation of itself".<sup>12</sup> It is as though there is a kind of "intellectual timidity" plaguing the country, so much so that his article ends with a "plea for speculative audacity", a call "for more faith in ideas".<sup>13</sup>

On the rationale of this "intellectual timidity" one might debate at length, but the point is that while Dewey was writing his paper American society and institutions were experiencing a dramatic fluidity, and within a couple of decades things would change radically.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. "Something genuinely American"

Dewey's account reveals that during the 1920s a dissonance persisted between the reality of American society and its self-representation: the nation's self-perception was at odds with its actual state. Let us then make a temporal leap and move straight to 1946. In this year Herbert W. Schneider, a natural philosopher from Columbia, publishes a book entitled *A History of American Philosophy*. In the Preface of it he argues that it makes no sense, when speaking of America, to look for an indigenous philosophical tradition, since local culture and traditions had always been saturated with predominantly European cultural influences.

America was intellectually colonial long after it gained political independence and has been intellectually provincial long after it ceased being intellectually colonial. We still live intellectually on the fringe of European culture.<sup>15</sup>

There is no more vivid example of this, Schneider says, than the tremendous impact that new ideas coming from Europe are having on our philosophical culture. Here he is referring to the increasing influence played in the U.S. by some major European philosophical trends, like the British analytic philosophy, Gilson's neo-Thomism and of course the logical positivism. These philosophies, Schneider informs us, "are now pervasive forces in American culture", and it is easy to foresee that they will produce new hybridizations whose concrete forms are not currently visible.<sup>16</sup>

So far, nothing remarkable. But in developing this topic of hybridizations Schneider admits that it is not easy to understand how the energy and vitality inherent in American traditions interact with new imports. It is difficult to make a portrait of our "ancestral soul", he says, because "the Writing of American intellectual history is in a highly experimental stage". And the conclusion is that the history of American philosophy "still remains to be written".<sup>17</sup> Once again, Dewey's views seem to be reconfirmed, except that in 1963 this *History of American Philosophy* is published in a second edition and in this renewed version Schneider informs the reader that he changed his mind on one fundamental point. A new section

entitled *The Emergence of Naturalistic Realisms* has been added. But there is more than this, since Schneider would like to add another last section and entitle it *The Emergence of a Naturalistic Humanism or of Humanistic Naturalism*.

The interest in this seemingly marginal editorial news is quickly explained: in the 1946 edition Schneider was still uncertain about the correct classification of that very recent philosophical movement called “humanistic naturalism” or “naturalistic humanism”. But fifteen or so years later, his ideas cleared up and now he establishes without hesitations that the philosophical turmoil following World War I could in no way be exhausted under the heading of “realism”, because what emerged on the scene of national debate was “something genuinely American”:

The thinking that emerged has no technical name and little formal unity, but even at this short historical distance it appears on the scene as something genuinely American.<sup>18</sup>

This is a relevant statement, for here Schneider claims that naturalism, despite its vagueness, represents an original phenomenon rooted in the American philosophical culture.

One would be tempted to say: there it is, that bold cultural event so longed for by Dewey. And yes, this is probably correct. Yet, this would be a hasty conclusion if we were to rely solely on Schneider’s testimony. But he was not alone in thinking this way. Roy Wood Sellars, just to say, in a tiny volume entitled *Reflections on American Philosophy from Within*, came to the same conclusions, namely that naturalism was an exquisitely American philosophical event.<sup>19</sup> Marvin Farber too believed that “naturalistic evolutionary philosophy” constituted an essential phenomenon of the “American philosophical world”, so much so that he referred to it to the late Husserl in a letter dated March 26, 1937.<sup>20</sup>

There are several sources that agree with Schneider’s thesis. Some of them will be considered in the next paragraphs, but for now let us settle on a first conclusion, which has methodological as well as substantive value: in the 1940s the idea that philosophical naturalism was a phenomenon essentially rooted in American cultural history began to circulate quite widely. The disparity Dewey lamented is on the mend: a cultural self-representation of the country is now emerging. This explicit acknowledgment allows us to delve deeper into the topic of the relations between naturalism and society, that is, to take a first step toward the construction of a broader hypothesis concerning the relations between naturalism and civilization.

## 5. The image of a naturalized country

Until now, our discussion has revolved around a few methodological approaches: from Dewey’s appeal to Schneider’s reflections. It is within this timeframe that the concept of a self-sustaining civilization, independent rather than derivative of European traditions, starts to surface. An essay entitled *Naturalism in America* by Larrabee (1944) helps us better understand in what sense naturalism intersects the new self-consciousness developing in mid-twentieth-century American society.<sup>21</sup> And it also helps us understand in what sense naturalism contributes to declining the concept of “civilization” in a peculiar way. Larrabee adopts a methodological approach supported by a broad historical analysis. In analysing naturalism, he starts from the colonial period, he investigates the revolutionary and romantic epoch, and finally describes the meaning of naturalism for the American society of the early twentieth century.

On the premise that Larrabee was not a professional historian, and that his analyses should be considered critically, the most interesting side of his portrait regards the sort of historical self-understanding that leaks out through his report (he was a naturalist who was analysing the historical meaning of naturalism). The methodological key issue, once again, is that of an internal vision with respect to a topic that was displaying multiple signs of convergence.

The history of naturalism in America, Larrabee tells us, is the history of an attitude rather than a specific philosophical doctrine:

The career of naturalism in America is the history of the slow growth of an attitude rather than of a specific philosophical doctrine.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, not a philosophical school, but an attitude.<sup>23</sup> Specifically: an attitude of rejecting “unverifiable myths masquerading as literal truths”.<sup>24</sup> These unverifiable myths consist of the corpus of supernatural



doctrines that had dominated the country for centuries. Speaking of supernaturalism, Larrabee says, it is however helpful to draw a distinction between the practical-oriented behaviour of ordinary people and the more sophisticated academic circles. If we keep this distinction in mind, we can explain a kind of paradox, namely that

naturalism has been, at one and the same time, a major unreflective assumption of everyday existence in America and, until recently, one of the minor tendencies in American academic philosophy.<sup>25</sup>

For centuries there has been a kind of practical naturalism, not regimented by theory, but simply embodied in individual behaviours. Later in time there was also the emergence of naturalism as a successful philosophical trend, but this was only a more recent event. Then he claims, adding a new twist:

Naturalism is no sudden overnight growth in America; neither is it a mischievously transplanted foreign importation. Its spread has been world-wide, because scientific enlightenment and technological control cannot be permanently hemmed in by geographical or political boundary lines. But it has roots in American soil, roots which run deeply into our national past.<sup>26</sup>

Here we have a few things that connect to Schneider's previous analysis. Naturalism is described as a global scale process that has to do with the advancement of scientific knowledge. Yet, the metaphor of American soil tells us that the spread of science and technology did not by itself produce a naturalized conception of the world, for there were already autonomous seeds planted in national soil.

Unlike Schneider, Larrabee characterizes naturalism not only as a philosophical event (pertaining to the history of contemporary American philosophy), but rather as a deep cultural and historical attitude that extensively interacted with "the course of American life". He considers naturalism as something deeply interwoven with the gradual evolution of American society. This is an important acknowledgment for the thesis I am trying to defend: Larrabee explicitly recognizes that naturalism is not just a philosophical movement, and he does so within *Naturalism and the Human Spirit* (1944), namely within the most important collective manifesto of early American naturalism. According to him, naturalism developed along two main paths:

- on the one hand, it represented a form of opposition to a stiff supernatural system on which a now sclerotized society had hinged. This line of development was at first sporadic but was gradually consolidated by intercepting the propulsive dynamics triggered by Darwin's evolutionary theories.
- on the other hand, the naturalistic attitude exploited the opportunities provided by the territory, namely the enormous economic and technological development that took place in the late 19th century.

Thus, on the one hand, the combined attack of common sense and science; on the other, the disruptive rise of economic, urban, and social changes: these were the two poles that described the history of a gradual but inexorable secularization. Naturalism in other words tells a long-standing history, which has only recently been framed by consistent philosophical syntheses.<sup>27</sup>

The diffusion of naturalism in America is, indeed, characterized by a sort of Janus-faced aspect. Its most impactful feature is related to a rhetoric of liberation: naturalism liberates from religious dogmas and from the preconceptions of traditional morality. It restores human nature to itself: it is a form of humanism. On the other side, however, coming to the Thirties, naturalism faces a new responsibility. Having wiped out the old supernatural system, the problem becomes the setting up of a new liberal model, in the sense that a new social and cultural agenda had to be worked out. But to this step, says Larrabee, no naturalist was seriously prepared.<sup>28</sup>

By contrast with the extravagant claims and promises of the philosophies which preceded it, naturalism seemed at first to be composed of little more than negations and renunciations. [...] Its first great task was polemical, to free itself from its medieval fetters and to deprive its jailers of their powers of censorship. [...] But with the collapse of supernaturalism and its idealistic props under the triple impact of evolution, industrial urbanization, and modern war, naturalism found itself face to face with the new responsibilities of reconstruction and re-education.<sup>29</sup>

Here Larrabee describes the first moment of this dual phase: early naturalism is characterized by a sort of antagonistic attitude, which is part and parcel of its general criticism toward a certain idea of

traditional society. It is a liberation process, fraught with negations, because in the name of science naturalists are primarily clear about what they no longer want to believe. But with science alone one does not govern the desires, fears, and hopes of a multi-layered society, and so it was that the collapse of the old social system was succeeded by a new responsibility:

By the nineteen-thirties it became evident that idealism and an inclusive naturalism had virtually exchanged places and that the latter was likely to become the dominant American philosophical temper of the mid-century. [...] The sudden overturn in prestige, however, brought with it the necessity of a change of strategy from attack to defence, and the acceptance of new and sobering responsibilities for philosophical reconstruction, for which no American naturalist was fully prepared.<sup>30</sup>

Here is the backlash: from being an alternative and mostly polemical philosophical attitude, naturalism becomes a major trend that must face a new civil and institutional responsibility. Suddenly, a kind of paradox pops up, whose inconsistent core was brilliantly described by Dilman Walter Gotshalk in the very same years (*The Paradox of Naturalism*, 1946). The paradox runs as follows: on the one hand, a certain self-image has finally emerged in the country and, regardless of its one-sidedness (because it mostly pertained to the academic elite and it somehow overlooked the supernaturalistic and conservative drives that were still effective in the nation), was nonetheless an expression of a strong intellectual ambition, exactly in the sense advocated by Dewey. On the other hand, the promise of a rational implementation of democracy, along with the fulfilment of social progress, was now requesting the bill, for the time had come to present effectual contents and ameliorative proposals. It was no longer a matter of scientific attitude, but of social reforms.

Gotshalk notes that the superior reliability of contemporary scientific theories was not enough, since the strength of supernaturalism did not lie in the appeal to a supersensible dimension made up of souls, entelechies or supernatural deities, but rather in the scheme of a perfect integration between the individual agency and the rational order of things. Human beings are part of a natural order that provides significance to their moral and social behaviour.<sup>31</sup> In the supernatural model everything is welded together. A shift in the epistemic balance of truth is not enough to shatter the unity of this powerful interpretive scheme. Lenin's doctrines for instance, Gotshalk adds quoting *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, express a form of materialistic naturalism as well. But in this case materialism is balanced by a philosophy of history that places human beings at the centre of a "dialectic of cosmic process", whereas in the absence of a conception of the role played by humans in the grand scheme of things, ordinary minds will prefer the appeal of the supernatural.<sup>32</sup>

The situation was therefore becoming complex, since the dismantling of the old supernatural system didn't imply the acceptance of a new (more reliable and human) model of scientific rationality, but it was now required to win the challenge of social progress by the edification of a true liberal and democratic society.<sup>33</sup> Henceforth, it was no longer just an epistemic issue at stake, but there was the need to substantiate the liberal values of American society by diminishing its social inequalities, providing a fair distribution of economic welfare, ensuring equal access to political life and education. Naturalism was now called to deliver its promises: individual freedom had to be developed in a social sense, religion had to be naturalized along the line of the new humanistic-oriented stance,<sup>34</sup> science, democracy and freedom had to become the founding pillars of a renewed liberal society. Once again, it was no longer just a matter of philosophy, and "no American naturalist was fully prepared" for it.

This is the great fresco provided by *Naturalism in America* and these are the paradoxes of naturalism that, as we can see, intersect as much with Dewey's reflections on civilization as with Schneider's own view of a genuinely American philosophy.

To sum up the results of this section: what we have gained in terms of understanding is that naturalism can in no way be considered "only" a philosophical system (albeit a genuinely American one), because it was much more than that. Its ancestral soul was rooted in an "attitude" that intersected some of the most significant transformations in American history. From the construction of a fragile national identity after the bloody events of the Civil War, to the economic expansion of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, from the crisis of '29, to the onslaught of Neo-Thomist conservatism in the 1930s, and to the international leadership assumed after World War II: naturalist debates punctuated each of these moments. They provided their cultural context. And it is from this historical frame that slowly emerges that strong and victorious



image of a new civilization on which the United States built part of its later narrative. That entity that Elias, and before him Spengler, called the “West” had ended up buried under the rubble of war, and henceforth the pragmatics of the term would have more than just a European significance.

## 6. Ideals and Ideologies

By the end of the war, naturalism is no longer just a national issue. After 1945, the question of national identity overlaps with the role the United States plays in the construction of a new international geopolitical order. The new diplomatic, economic, and military leadership interacts in a twofold sense with that self-image we have talked about so far. First, by confirming it: the public image of the United States is that of a democratic, liberal, secularized country that espouses, at least in its most progressive part, the principles of a humanistic naturalism. It doesn’t matter how shallow this image was, because, to paraphrase Elias, what really mattered was its higher function. The post-war period, in fact, overloads it with additional meanings, and this is the second point that needs to be highlighted: the liberal dimension of the naturalist creed (“the democratic way of life”) now embodies the values of the entire “free world”, namely it overlaps with that international entity that in the Cold War becomes the “Western bloc”.

The ideal dimension of American liberal democracy thus takes on a subtle ideological bent to the extent that the principles of scientific humanism are now used as a political-cultural tool for the construction of a new international order. The conceptual tools by which the national identity had been shaped are now transformed into ideological features apt to reconstruct the broken identity of Western allied countries. National affairs become supranational, and naturalism a sort of an export commodity.

That which has just been stated summarizes in a nutshell the theses presented by Arthur E. Murphy in a paper entitled *Ideals and Ideologies: 1910-1947*, which describes the ideological tensions of the post-war period.<sup>35</sup> Murphy argues that the image that the U.S. has developed over the past decades is at a kind of a crossroads, because either the nation is prepared to follow its liberal calling to the end, or it will be forced to admit that its noblest ideals have turned into ideological weapons aimed at geopolitical dominance.

Summarily stated, this is a period in which philosophical ideas have lost their status as reasons addressed to a community and maintained by a process within which their claims make sense and have a social function and have been interpreted instead as toys (or “visions” or “bright pictures”), as tools, and more recently as weapons in a world- wide struggle for power.<sup>36</sup>

There is one factual event that makes Murphy’s concerns concrete. But before examining it, it might be useful to recapitulate the sense of the analyses we have conducted so far:

1. first, we placed the naturalist debates within the broader context of the American society of the late 19th and early 20th century;
2. this broad context allowed us to understand the extent to which naturalism intercepted the changes and spirits of a country that was going through a complex social transition;
3. naturalism became the dominant cultural model between the 1920s and 1940s, and in some ways provided an overall philosophical synthesis in which the more educated and progressive part of the country recognized itself;
4. naturalism actually contributes to the formation of a new model of civilization, with a cultural identity independent of European traditions, precisely in the sense advocated by Dewey;
5. despite what it may seem, the image offered by naturalism is not always transparent, but is sometimes rather blurred. Indeed, it tends to glorify itself as a successful narrative. But in doing so it actually lost touch with the social tensions that were meanwhile acting under the radar (e.g., beliefs in the supernatural, lack of social integration, racism, minority rights);
6. the Cold War transforms this self-image because the U.S.’s role as major player in the international geopolitical arena overlaps with the national narrative. The exercise of military, economic and diplomatic leadership powerfully retroacts on the ideal of a liberal and democratic society;
7. this new international leadership feeds itself by bending the use of existing cultural resources. One usually refers to propaganda spread by the film industry, but that is not enough. And this is the last point that remains to be analysed.

## 7. A philosophy for the UNESCO

The fear expressed by Murphy, namely that naturalism might encounter a strong ideological drift, because of the given historical contingency, refers to the events related to the founding of supranational institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and so on, which was taking place in those very years, and it was part of a larger process of internationalization. In the same years in which naturalism produced its greatest manifestos, a program of world pacification through cultural interventions was being promoted by international diplomatic circles. The program of a liberal internationalism was an integral part of Roosevelt's political legacy and was aimed at encouraging, through the establishment of international organizations, a peaceful cooperation among the states by the adoption of multi-lateral economic, juridical, and political principles. The founding of UNESCO was an essential part of this project, and its first director, Sir Julian Huxley, engaged in the development of a cultural project that aspired to spread to every latitude the principles of "scientific humanism"<sup>37</sup>.

"War begins in the minds of men", reads the preamble to the UNESCO constitution (1946), meaning that it is "in the minds of men that the defence of peace must be constructed".<sup>38</sup> This is why UNESCO will seek to promote and disseminate intellectual and moral values based on the solidarity of humankind and will aim for the implementation of cultural, scientific and educational exchanges among the different countries that make up the international community.

Three points are highlighted in the Preamble to the UNESCO Constitution: 1) the ethical value of democracy, which alone is capable of defeating "ignorance and prejudice" by affirming the principles of dignity, equality and respect for the human person; 2) the value of knowledge, defined as the "unrestricted pursuit of objective truth", since it is only through confrontation, "free exchange of ideas", and wide diffusion of culture and education that a lasting peace among peoples can be achieved; 3) the mutual cooperation of nations in the strategic fields of science, culture and education.

The Charter thus seeks to leverage the potentially universal dimension of these principles by emphasizing their objectivity. What is asked of nations is to share some very general ethical principles that can apply to all latitudes, regardless of denominational, cultural, and political differences. It is the entire Charter that strives to assume a diplomatically "objective" position.

In a supporting document, entitled *UNESCO. Its Purpose and its Philosophy*, the underlying idea of the Preambles is made explicit by Huxley. We read in it that democracy as an ideal value can have a scientific justification and that this justification can apply in an "objective" way, but this entails the acceptance of a set of principles "concerning human existence and its aims and objects".<sup>39</sup> More specifically, this means that nations are asked to acknowledge a "working philosophy" that will run like this:

- it will be, so to speak, denominational, philosophical, and economically neutral;<sup>40</sup>
- it will be based on some form of humanism, because it must apply to "all people in the world";<sup>41</sup>
- it will therefore recognize the need for a "world humanism" and especially a "scientific humanism", since only science provides the objective basis for the foundation of a properly human culture;<sup>42</sup>
- it will be based on the principles of evolutionary biology, because only "a general theory of evolution can provide the necessary intellectual scaffolding for modern humanism";<sup>43</sup>
- it will acknowledge the objectivity of the idea of "progress" – which involves an increase in our "control over nature";<sup>44</sup>
- it will give special attention to the problem of "constructing a unified pool of tradition for the human species as a whole";<sup>45</sup>
- it will provide for the possibility of a progressive political unification;<sup>46</sup>
- it will place the human individual at the centre of society and disprove all theories in which the State is higher than the individual "like those of Hegelian philosophy, of Fascism, or of Nazism";<sup>47</sup>
- it will acknowledge that science is "the most international activity" performed by humans;<sup>48</sup>
- it will promote the study of philosophy as "an aid in the clarification of values for the benefit of mankind in general" and such a philosophy will be that of "evolutionary humanism";<sup>49</sup>
- it will use techniques of persuasion and information as a "true propaganda", bending them to the international task of peace, and if necessary, it will utilize them, as Lenin envisioned, to overcome the resistance of millions to desirable change";<sup>50</sup>

Julian Huxley's document, as it is easy to imagine, stirred up a hornet's nest of controversy, and was strongly criticized also by the U.S. delegation.<sup>51</sup> But this is not the most interesting part of the story. What deserves to be emphasized is that the British biologist Huxley served since 1929 on the board of the First Humanist Society, founded in New York by Charles Francis Potter.<sup>52</sup> And that the consonance of themes with American "scientific humanism" does not even need to be highlighted, because it is stated *apertis verbis* and represents the inspiring philosophy of the whole document. It goes without saying that in the interwar period, to speak of "scientific humanism", "humanistic naturalism", or "naturalistic humanism" was all in all equivalent (it will no longer be the case from the 1950s onward). We noticed it in Schneider, we can note it in Roy Wood Sellars – who by the way was the main drafter of the *Humanist Manifesto* (that was co-signed also by Dewey and, of course, by Huxley himself) –, but it can be verified in many other authors as well. The link between Huxley's stances and the topics of the naturalistic debate so far analyzed is indeed very strong. What stands out most, however, is its ideological deployment: within an institutional forum designed to conciliate the international community, naturalism serves as an ideologically neutral binder. It becomes the diplomatic tool that allows the real ambitions of the new American-driven Western world to be shielded: the necessary step that, in Huxley's intentions, was to lay the groundwork for a new naturalized, liberal-democratic, and scientific-oriented society.

What is interesting to note, indeed, is that when Arthur Murphy in his 1947 talk at the APA pointed out a possible ideological drift of naturalism, he was referring to some very tangible fears, as these UNESCO events demonstrate. But Murphy was not referring only to this. Two years earlier he had given a scathing review of *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, pointing out the possible dire consequences it had for American liberal beliefs. Murphy argues, in fact, that the emphasis placed on the procedures by the Columbia-sponsored type of naturalism, risks turning philosophy into a kind of inescapable cage in so far as any inquiry that does not fully adopt a naturalized method of investigation will be placed at the edge of the scientific boundary (where rationality tends to be considered no more rational). This kind of naturalism, according to Murphy, because of its apparent soft pliability, is extremely stifling for it does not provide an alternative: anyone who deviates from the norms of a standard naturalized methodology will find herself playing in a defensive position, being accused of fideism, of irrationality, or of being an enemy of science and society.<sup>53</sup>

But from the point of view of Murphy, such a divide between scientific and anti-scientific philosophy was wrong. Overlapping "science" and "democracy", as was also done by Hook in an essay entitled *Naturalism and Democracy*,<sup>54</sup> ended up overloading the liberal model with an ideological partisanship. The risk was to turn the world into a field of antagonistic forces, a struggle between good guys and bad guys. And this could be perhaps acceptable from the Cold War strategy, but certainly not from a philosophical perspective: naturalism had to escape this game of ideologization. Philosophy cannot be reduced to the cultural prop of an ideological struggle.

It seems to me a genuine misfortune that "naturalism" as a defense of intelligent inquiry should thus have become identified with "naturalism" as a particular philosophical theory about the methods by which such inquiry can, in special areas, most effectively and adequately proceed. For the result of this identification is that the "naturalists" seem at times to be maintaining that no one can differ from them on this specifically philosophical issue without thereby showing himself to be at least a crypto-fascist and enemy of free inquiry. This is unfair to the philosophers so characterized but - what is of greater importance - it is a serious tactical error for the defenders of free inquiry to commit. For what it does is to force into the camp of the "enemy" men of genuine good will whose support and understanding will be badly needed when the authentic enemies of freedom are met.<sup>55</sup>

Murphy was not alone in advancing this kind of perplexity. So far, in fact, we have described naturalism as a unitary event, glossing over the multiple internal articulations, which reported multiple, dissonant, and sometimes conflicting positions. For instance, the idea that the social claims of democracy should be construed in a Marxist sense was widespread in the 1930s. The idea that liberal naturalism was too epistemically weak to support social and philosophical demands formed the heart of the criticism advanced by Roy Wood Sellars to the Columbia manifesto. In a review of the same years Sellars shows his profound dissatisfaction for it:

the present book makes an impression upon me akin to that of much of traditional liberalism, that is, an unwillingness to pass beyond benevolent attitudes, a fear of doctrines.<sup>56</sup>

The expression “fear of doctrines” is interesting, because it reminds us of what Larrabee said: naturalism is a liberal attitude, which is rather weak when it comes to social reforms. What is naturalism after all, Sellars asks? Is it just a viable and successful tool of research? But how can we disregard the very fact that scientific inquiries are completely restructuring our ideas of what a “physical system” really is? The image of nature, the image of humans, the image of what it means to be an organism acting in a natural environment have been radically disrupted by contemporary science. There is a striking contrast between the benevolent and methodologically pervasive proposal of *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, and the need for a renewed ontological commitment that is demanded by science itself.<sup>57</sup>

The scientific method doesn’t merely classify what counts as an “empirical knowledge”, but radically reshapes the ontology of modern philosophies, and at the same time overturns the traditional idea of “materialism”. The consequential naturalist must therefore eschew the attitude defended by Hook, according to which the procedural dimension of science represents by itself the preamble to a democratic culture, but she can only defend the position of a physical realism.<sup>58</sup> This is why, according to Sellars, one must carefully analyse the attempts of Marxist epistemologies to dialectically reformulate the modern mechanism:

After all, Marxism expressed an effort to reform what is called mechanical materialism. And it did have a sense for the social *Wissenschaften*.<sup>59</sup>

The idea is that a materialist ontology constitutes the most appropriate platform for constructing appropriate answers to social questions, which were the prerogative of traditional religion and morality. This is the core of the *Philosophy for the Future* manifesto that Sellars published in ‘49 together with Marvin Farber and Vivian Jerauld McGill. The aspiration was to forge a theory of integrated levels, which involved philosophy as well as social, physical, and biological sciences. The goal was to meet the normative challenge posed by social philosophy, namely, to find normative principles governing the concepts of “moral order” and “social group”, but always remaining within a materialist interpretation of natural processes:

It will, I believe, interest my readers to find a materialist recognizing the normative as a guiding factor in the moral order intrinsic to group life. [...] [Moral principles] are irreducible to non-moral terms. But that does not signify that they are non-natural, for man is, in group life, a moral being.<sup>60</sup>

The *Philosophy for the Future* was thus a Marxist-inspired project in which social issues could finally find a solid scientific justification.

Whereas this type of naturalism [*Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, A.M.N.] is reluctant to commit itself to a positive theory of the world, materialism endeavors to set forth a synoptic view of man and the universe implicit in the sciences at their present stage of development.<sup>61</sup>

A synoptic view of human beings and the universe supported by the resources of scientific tools: this was the integrated direction towards which to move to dissolve that “paradox of naturalism” that we previously encountered in Gotshalk. The only problem is that by ‘49 times had changed, and, in the years of McCarthyism, the *Philosophy for the Future* was accused of promoting Marxist positions and thus essentially ignored.<sup>62</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

By the end of the war, naturalism becomes part of a larger context in which political, diplomatic, and international dynamics come into play. Some guiding principles of naturalism were almost automatically incorporated into Western societies. The democratic West tells in fact the story of a secularized, liberal, and scientific-minded society. But all this also carried a load of political-ideological implications, which, in a sense, naturalism itself was called upon to disguise. The principles of scientific humanism, recalled in the UNESCO Charter, served precisely for this purpose: to establish that human beings are equal at all latitudes, that the sectarianism of religious denominations had to be overcome, that scientific method was objective, and that the procedures of democratic societies were as transparent as those practiced by science. In a word, the neutrality of naturalist grammar was being extolled, as it had been explicitly

stated by William Ray Dennes in one of the most discussed and controversial essays in *Naturalism and the Human Spirit* (*The Categories of Naturalism* – Dennes, 1944).

And this is how we end our long run, ending up where we started. Norbert Elias had made us aware of the fact that the word “civilization” was ultimately a term denoting the self-consciousness of the West. And the United States, as it will be remembered, was not even mentioned in his analyses, which instead reflected a pan-European spirit common to Spengler, Husserl, and so many other continental philosophers. Not even a decade later, the pragmatics and definitions of the word were changing with such a radicality that in Europe it would even be difficult to accept this cultural shift, especially among intellectuals and academic circles. Naturalism has a lot to do with this story, because it is the cultural movement that most closely accompanied the transition from rural America of the late 19th century, steeped in traditional religions and old social myths, to the America of the 1940s, which represented itself as an apparently secularized country, science-oriented, that believed in specialism, technology, and had a renewed faith in freedom and democracy. “Science”, “freedom”, and “democracy” represented the seals that summed up the deepest ideals of this new naturalized civilization and were at the same time the symbols of a new and powerful ideology – which resembled, at times, the face of a new religious faith.

## Notes

1. By “early American naturalism” I broadly mean that specific philosophical movement which spread in the United States towards the second half of the nineteenth century, following the early reception of Darwin’s book *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin, 1859), and which flourished in the first half of the twentieth century, producing conferences, debates, and philosophical manifestos. See: Kim, *The American Origins of Philosophical Naturalism*, 2003, pp. 83-98; Nunziante, 2012. For a broader account of historical naturalisms and their relationship to contemporary naturalist debate, see De Caro – MacArthur, *The Routledge Handbook of Liberal Naturalism*, Part I, pp. 5-94.
2. Among the few scholars who have analyzed the political, social, and cultural ramifications of early American naturalism are Purcell Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value*, 1973; Jewett, *Naturalizing Liberalism in the 1950s*, 2014; Nunziante, 2012; Weldon, *The Scientific Spirit of American Humanism*, 2020; Giladi, 2021, *Prolegomenon to any Future Critical Responses to Naturalism*, 2021.
3. See Giles Scott-Smith, *The Politics of Apolitical Culture. The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA and postwar American hegemony*, 2002. For an analysis on how the Cold War transformed American philosophical debate, see George A. Reisch, *How the Cold War Transformed Philosophy of Science*, 2005.
4. This is the characteristic thesis defended by Purcell Jr. 1973. The idea is that naturalism initially characterizes itself as a progressive movement and then turns into a socially conservative instance. In fact, whereas in its early steps naturalism represents a formidable tool of social change, as the years go by (indeed, as early as the crisis of the 1930s, but especially in the 1940s and 1950s) it loses its transformative power to assume instead a normative and value-driven character - disconnected from the real social processes that were running through American society. See Purcell Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*, cit., pp. 211 and pp. 256-257.
5. Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 3.
6. Ibid., 3.
7. Ibid., 4.
8. Franz Boas (1858-1942) and Alfred Kroeber (1876-1960) were the pioneers of the American anthropological school. Both focused, among other things, on the very concept of “culture” (Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man*; Kroeber, “The Superorganic”), defending the idea (especially Kroeber) that “civilization and heredity are two things that operate in separate ways” (Kroeber, “The Superorganic”, 184). The influence of their ideas on American Social Sciences was huge. It is also true, however, that Boas was born in Germany and remained attached throughout his life to the ideals of the German *Kultur* (see Degler, 1989, *Culture versus Biology*, 2) and that Kroeber himself, although he was born in the United States, was the son of German parents.
9. Dewey, “The Rôle of Philosophy in the History of Civilization”, 8.
10. Ibid., 4.
11. Ibid., 5.
12. Ibid., 8.
13. Ibid., 9.
14. In 1916 Arthur O. Lovejoy had delivered a very famous Presidential Address at the annual meeting of the APA (*On Some Conditions of Progress in Philosophical Inquiry*), in which he theorized the need for greater professionalization of philosophy. Lovejoy was pushing in the direction of creating a “scientific philosophy” that would abandon philosophy’s traditional tasks of producing morally edifying discourses or playing the role of an intellectual critique of society and rather transform itself into a science proper, that is, embracing the specialism of inquiry proper to the empirical sciences (Lovejoy, “On Some Conditions”, 123-163; Campbell, *A Thoughtful Profession*, 281).



15. Schneider, *A History of American Philosophy*, viii. In recent years Marsoobian and Ryder (2004) have vigorously revived the topic of the distinction between “American philosophy” and “philosophy in America”. The former, they argue, stems from the Puritan tradition of the early settlers and, through the great classics of the nineteenth century, reaches all the way to pragmatism, realism, and philosophical naturalism. The second has developed from the postwar period onward and coincides with the analytical direction that developed, and implemented the European tradition of the Vienna circle, as well as the logical and linguistic analyses provided by Russell and Wittgenstein. See A. Marsoobian- J. Ryder, *The Blackwell Guide to American Philosophy*, xv.
16. Schneider, *A History of American Philosophy*, viii.
17. *Ibid.*, x.
18. *Ibid.*, 516-17.
19. Sellars (1969), *Reflections on American Philosophy*, 5-6.
20. Cho, “Phenomenology as Cooperative Task: Husserl-Farber Correspondence During 1936-37”, 35.
21. Harold Atkins Larrabee (1894-1979) was a professor of philosophy at Union College in Schenectady (New York). Educated at Columbia, then at Union Theological Seminary, and finally at Harvard, he was first a student and then a young colleague of Josiah Royce, William James and George Santayana. He was for forty years Editor of “The New England Quarterly” and author of several books, one of the most famous of which Larrabee (1945) was *The Reliable Knowledge: Scientific Methods in the Social Science*, published in New York in 1945.
22. Larrabee, “Naturalism in America”, 319.
23. John Herman Randall Jr, who was in some ways the originator of the very project of *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, writes thus in his essay entitled *The Nature of Naturalism*: “Most of the essays in this volume point out that the naturalism they are adopting is not so much a system or a body of doctrine as an attitude and temper: it is essentially a philosophic method and a program” (Randall Jr., “The Nature of Naturalism, 374).
24. Larrabee, “Naturalism in America”, 319.
25. *Ibid.*, 320.
26. *Ibid.*, 320.
27. *Ibid.*, 321.
28. *Ibid.*, 351.
29. *Ibid.*, 324.
30. *Ibid.*, 351.
31. Gotshalk, “The Paradox of Naturalism”, 156.
32. *Ibid.*, 156.
33. This is one of the critical points on which Purcell Jr. most insists. Early naturalism is a scientific-cultural phenomenon marked by a strong social inspiration. And equally strong is the idea that liberal society must necessarily be socially transformative to be considered authentically democratic. But with the crisis of the 1930s and even more in the 1940s, we witness a strong defense of existing values, as well of as the the current model of democracy (which almost all naturalists still judged to be radically flawed). The latter is taken as an instance endowed with normative value; it becomes the model that all democracies should follow. And the progressive and transformative social instance is, in fact, transformed into a conservative one aimed at preserving the good old existing system. See Purcell Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*, pp. 233-272.
34. See Sellars (1918), *The Next Step in Religion* and Dewey (1934), *A Common Faith*.
35. Murphy’s paper was presented at an APA Western Division panel entitled *The Last Hundred Years in American Philosophy*. Among the panelists, in addition to Murphy, was Schneider himself, whom we mentioned earlier. About the normative value of naturalism, see also the reflections in Purcell, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*.
36. Murphy (1947), “Ideals and Ideologies: 1910-1947”, 378.
37. UNESCO was established as a specialized agency of the newly formed United Nations and was part of a broader internationalization program, which included the establishment of other parallel international agencies, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (whose creation was part of the 1944 Bretton-Woods Agreement), the FAO and the World Health Organization.
38. Julian Sorell Huxley (1887-1975), an English biologist and humanist with liberal tendencies, belonged to a family of important tradition (his grandfather, Thomas Henry Huxley, was Darwin’s friend and supporter, his father, Leonard, a prominent publisher, and his brother Aldous is the famous writer). He was the first director of UNESCO and in that capacity prepared, in 1946, the document to which we will refer below (*UNESCO. Its Purpose and its Philosophy*). The latter was presented at the first annual session of the General Conference in Paris and was followed by the *Preambles* to the UNESCO Constitution (Nov. 4, 1946).
39. Huxley, *UNESCO. Its Purpose and Philosophy*, 6.
40. *Ibid.*, 6-7.
41. *Ibid.*, 7.
42. *Ibid.*, 7.
43. *Ibid.*, 7-8.
44. *Ibid.*, 12.
45. *Ibid.*, 17.
46. *Ibid.*, 13.



47. Ibid., 16.
48. Ibid., 38.
49. Ibid., 39.
50. Ibid., 60.
51. Mc Keon reports on some of the heated debates that erupted during the first congress in Paris in '46, and how strong misgivings were already being raised by some delegates at that founding convention about that idea of "single philosophy" advanced by Huxley. The head of the Yugoslavian delegation, Vladimir Ribnikar, and the head of the U.S. delegation, William Benton both advanced, though on different grounds, serious misgivings about Huxley's proposal. According to them, issues related to education and culture should be reserved for the initiative of local communities. Similarly, during the Second Annual Session (Mexico City, December 1947), while the use of mass communications was being discussed, the fear was expressed by some delegates "that the nations in possession of superior technological equipment might be led by that material superiority to practice cultural imperialism". See McKeon, "A Philosophy for UNESCO", 579.
52. Huxley had an intense involvement with U.S. academia. In the four-year period 1912-1916 he took over as head of the Department of Biology at the Rice Institute in Houston, Texas.
53. Let us remember that by the mid-Forties continental metaphysics had a questionable reputation to say the least: "Heidegger constitutes an international danger" Marvin Farber wrote in 1945 (Farber, 1945, "Remarks about the Phenomenological Program", 3).
54. Hook (1944b), "Naturalism and Democracy", 40-64.
55. Murphy (1945), "Book Review. Naturalism and the Human Spirit", 404.
56. Sellars (1946), "Review. Naturalism and the Human Spirit", 438.
57. Ibid., 437.
58. With Sidney Hook, Sellars had an intense polemical exchange in the 1940s precisely on the issue of materialism. See Sellars, "Is Naturalism Enough?", 533-44; Hook (1944a), "Is Physicalism Realism Sufficient?", 544-51; Sellars (1944b), "Does Naturalism Need an Ontology?", 686-94.
59. Sellars, "Review. Naturalism and the Human Spirit", 438.
60. Sellars (1949), "Social Philosophy and the American Scene", 71.
61. Sellars (1949), Farber, McGill, *Philosophy for the Future*, ix-x.
62. See the negative reviews of the project: Williams, "Review", 341-43; Lenzen, "Review", 248-49; Creegan, "Review", 368.

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