

WEALTH AND THE DECLINE OF ILLTH

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One of the most intriguing yet complex areas to explore is the relationship between increasing knowledge, self-confidence and the ability of humans to control the natural world. In a general way we know that the elimination of much of 'illth' was due to the 'scientific' and technological revolutions of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in Europe. Yet there are still considerable puzzles as to **why** these revolutions occurred.

Possible explanations.

A number of historians and anthropologists have alluded to a major shift in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries which is roughly termed the 'scientific revolution'. For instance Kuhn has drawn attention to the 'paradigmatic' shift manifested in the work of Galileo and others, and Foucault to the change to a 'classical' episteme. Yet while providing examples of the shift, neither have been able to put forward any plausible explanation of **why** the shift occurred. Indeed they both specifically state that they leave it to others to explain **why** it happened.

The most ambitious attempt to solve the problem is that given in the two large books by Keith Thomas, **Religion and the Decline of Magic** (1970) and **Man and the Natural World** (1983). In the limited time available I will examine the Thomas thesis as shown in the first of these to see if he has solved the Weberian problems of the disenchantment of the world.

The central initial premise is based on Malinowski's thesis that magic 'is to be expected and generally to be found whenever man comes to an unbridgeable gap, a hiatus in his knowledge or in his powers of practical control, and yet has to continue in his pursuit.'¹ As Thomas notes, these theories 'constitute one of the few direct assaults on the difficult question of why it is that magical beliefs decline'² and hence, inversely, why science emerges. He further quotes Malinowski to the effect that 'Magic is dominant when control of the environment is weak', and Evans-Pritchard to the effect that the advances of science and technology have rendered magic redundant.'³ Thomas'

¹ □Malinowski, quoted in Thomas, Religion, 647

² □Thomas, Religion, 647

³ □Thomas, Religion, 648

reaction is that 'When applied to the facts of sixteenth and seventeenth-century society, it makes a good deal of initial sense.'⁴ What then, in Thomas' account, was this 'environment' and how did its change help to explain the decline of magic?

In the first chapter of his book Thomas provides a brilliant over-view of the insecure world of the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries in England, a country which was 'still a pre-industrial society, and many of its essential features closely resembled those of the 'under-developed' areas of today.'⁵ The pre-occupations with 'the explanation and relief of human misfortune', we are told 'reflected the hazards of an intensely insecure environment.'⁶

The first insecurity 'was the expectation of life.' Thomas cites evidence to show that 'Tudor and Stuart Englishmen were, by our standards, exceedingly liable to pain, sickness and premature death.'⁷ In relation to the latter, for example, he cites the low life expectancy of the aristocracy and though noting expectations of life at birth as high as 40-45 in some country villages, concludes that contemporaries knew that 'life was short, and that the odds were against any individual living out his short span.'⁸

The second insecurity was the food supply, which 'was always precarious.' 'About one harvest in six seems to have been a total failure' and 'mortality could soar when times of dearth coincided with (or perhaps even occasioned) large-scale epidemics.'⁹ People died of starvation and exposure in the streets, and most people suffered from vitamin deficiencies. People were 'chronically under-nourished and vulnerable to tuberculosis and gastric upsets...'¹⁰

The third insecurity was disease. 'There were periodic waves of influenza, typhus, dysentery....smallpox', but the worst of all was bubonic plague, which 'terrified by its suddenness, its

⁴ □Thomas, Religion, 648

⁵ □ibid, 3

⁶ □ibid, 5

⁷ □ibid, 5

⁸ □ibid, 6

⁹ □ibid, 6

¹⁰ □ibid, 7

virulence and its social effects.¹¹ In this pain-filled environment, 'medical science was helpless before most contemporary hazards to health.'¹² Doctors were unable to diagnose and hence to cure most diseases, and in any case, physicians were too expensive for the majority of the population.¹³

The fourth insecurity was fire. Thus 'Unable to prevent the outbreak of fire, and virtually helpless during the actual conflagration, contemporaries showed little more resource when it came to bearing the loss.'¹⁴

Thomas finds that 'poverty, sickness and sudden disaster were thus familiar features of the social environment of this period.'¹⁵ Given this background, he is not surprised to find that people were driven to alcohol, tobacco and gambling on a large scale.¹⁶ In a long review of Thomas' book, Lawrence Stone echoes and endorses this view in even more trenchant terms. 'Premodern man' lived in a world where 'Both groups and individuals were under constant threat, at the mercy of the hazards of weather, fire, and disease, a prey to famines, pandemics, wars and other wholly unpredictable calamities. This insecurity produced a condition of acute anxiety, bordering in times on hysteria, and a desperate yearning for relief and reassurance.'¹⁷

The major part of Thomas' **Religion and Decline of Magic**, some six hundred pages of detailed ethnography, is then devoted to showing the gradual erosion of the magical world view and the birth of modern science. What happened was the 'scientific and philosophical revolution of the seventeenth century', that is 'the triumph of the mechanical philosophy.' There was a rejection of 'scholastic Aristotelianism and of the Neo-platonic theory', which killed off magic. 'The notion that the universe was subject to immutable natural laws killed the concept of miracles, weakened the belief in the physical efficiency of prayer, and diminished faith in the possibility of direct divine

¹¹ □ *ibid*, 7-8

¹² □ *ibid*, 8

¹³ □ *ibid*, 7-12

¹⁴ □ *ibid*, 16

¹⁵ □ *ibid*, 17

¹⁶ □ *ibid*, 17-21

¹⁷ □ Stone, *Past and Present*, 155-6

inspiration.¹⁸ This was Weber's great 'disenchantment of the world', without which 'modernity' could not have occurred. Yet why did it happen? For the theory that the new mechanistic philosophy can be the explanation is clearly inadequate. Not only is it tautologous - one is trying to explain the growth of a new world view by the growth of that same world view, but the timing is wrong. This latter point is made, for example, by Lawrence Stone. 'The trouble with this explanation is that skepticism about magic and witchcraft was growing among clergy, lawyers, doctors and lay magistrates in the early seventeenth century, before the new natural science had made any real impact.'¹⁹

As Thomas admits, 'The most difficult problem in the study of magical beliefs is thus to explain how it was that men were able to break out of them.'²⁰ Returning to the early Malinowski thesis and the various types of insecurity which he has suggested were 'reflected' in early religious and magical beliefs, the obvious place for Thomas to search is for changes in those insecurities.

At first he seems to find some evidence for a major change in the later seventeenth century. He notes that population pressure decreased and that this, with improvements in agriculture, began to overcome the danger of harvest fluctuations.²¹ He notices the absence of bubonic plague after 1665 and the fact that, by the end of the century the English, with the exception of the Dutch, were the wealthiest nation in Europe.²² He notes improved communications, with newspapers flourishing which helped people, for example, to find lost goods.²³ The growth of deposit banking and fire and life insurance towards the end of the century, as well as improved fire-fighting equipment, mitigated some of the risks.²⁴ Several of these developments were built on embryonic sociology, economics and the statistical calculation of probabilities.²⁵

¹⁸ □ *ibid*, 643

¹⁹ □ Stone, *Past and Present*, 108

²⁰ □ *ibid*, 643

²¹ □ *ibid*, 650

²² □ *idem*

²³ □ 650-1

²⁴ □ 651-4

²⁵ □ 654

Yet when all is considered, Thomas comes to the conclusion that the Malinowski theory does not work: 'the more closely Malinowski's picture of magic giving away before technology is examined, the less convincing does it appear.'²⁶ He then proceeds to show why the Malinowski theory does not work.

Basically the problem is that given the nature of the insecurities outlined in his first chapter, the developments of the later seventeenth century were far too little and far too late. As Thomas points out, many of the sceptical and anti-magical attitudes were already present in the Lollard works of the fifteenth century. As he notes, for example, 'Many later medieval theologians were strongly 'rationalist' in temperament, and preferred to stress the importance of human self-help. They regarded the sacraments as symbolic representations rather than as instruments of physical efficacy.'²⁷ The sceptical attitudes were certainly fully developed by the time of Reginald Scot in the later sixteenth.²⁸ Much of the most important development of 'science', whether that of Bacon, Galileo, Harvey or the others had occurred well before the supposed improvements in insurance, fire-fighting and so on. As for the treatment of disease, Thomas elaborates in detail how despite increasing knowledge, 'so far as actual therapy was concerned, progress was negligible.'²⁹ Indeed we now know that the later seventeenth century was **unhealthier** than the later sixteenth century in England (REF XXX), which again undermines the views of growing security. Stone summarizes this central weakness; 'during the critical period when magic was in decline and the magical properties of religion also in retreat...there was really no great technological breakthrough.'³⁰

Thomas is thus puzzled. He suggests that the change must have been mental, rather than technological. 'For the paradox is that in England magic lost its appeal before the appropriate/technical solutions had been devised to take its place.'³¹ Indeed it was the reverse of Malinowski. 'It was the abandonment of magic which made possible the upsurge of technology, not the other way round', and this was one of the pre-conditions, as Weber had seen, for the

²⁶ □656

²⁷ □Thomas, Religion, 47

²⁸ □657

²⁹ □658

³⁰ □4 ne, Past and Present, 169

³¹ □656-7

'rationalization of economic life.'³²

If the change which occurred in the seventeenth century was not so much technological as mental,³³ what caused that change? Here Thomas admits defeat. He is 'forced to the conclusion that men emancipated themselves from these magical beliefs without necessarily having devised any effective technology with which to replace them.'³⁴ Yet, the ultimate origins of this faith in unaided human capacity remains mysterious.³⁵ Despite toying with the idea that 'the decline of the old magical belief' are connected to 'the growth of urban living, the rise of science, and the spread of an ideology of self-help.'³⁶ Thomas admits that 'the connection is only approximate and a more precise sociological/genealogy cannot at present be constructed.'³⁷ He might have added that the 'rise of science' and 'spread of an ideology of self-help' are merely parts of the problem to be explained, as we noted in relation to mechanistic philosophy.

Thus in terms of explanation of the decline of magic, the central theme of his work, Thomas has been unable to find a solution. The 'mystery' remains, just as it did after my own much more modest attempt at about the same period to 'explain' the decline of witchcraft.³⁸ We appear to be stuck.

The facts re-examined.

In her thoughtful probing of Keith Thomas' first book, Hildred Geertz draws attention to an epigraph used by Thomas, taken from Selden. 'The Reason of a Thing is not to be enquired after, til you are sure the Thing itself by so. We commonly are at **What's the Reason of it?** before we are sure of the Thing.' She continues with Selden's anecdote about Sir Robert Cotton who 'was exclaiming over the strange shape of a shoe which was said to have been worn by Moses, or at least

³² □ 657

³³ □ 661

³⁴ □ ibid, 663

³⁵ □ 663

³⁶ □ 665

³⁷ □ 666

³⁸ □ Macfarlane, Witchcraft, ch.xx and esp. p.202-3

by Noah, when his wife, apparently a much more simple soul, asked: "But Mr Cotton, are you sure it is a Shoe?"³⁹

Geertz uses this warning to lead into an attack on Thomas' use of the word 'magic', but it is equally worth looking at another part of the shoe which Thomas is investigating, namely the links in his argument concerning the environment which led to the decline of magic and the utilitarian and 'scientific' attitude to nature.

Perhaps the answer can be found by changing some of the parameters. Firstly, as we have seen both in relation to nature and the decline of magic the process was already well advanced before the sixteenth century. As compared to most magical worlds, that of the Pastons, of Chaucer, of Bartholamaeus Anglicus or Bracton was already very secularized. In his effort to redress the previous balance Keith Thomas probably exaggerated somewhat the magical elements of the earlier period. Witchcraft and popular magic were already somewhat peripheral. Most explanation was this-worldly, even if people also invoked God, Hell, fairies etc. This he admits on several occasions, as we have seen.

If we reformulate the problem thus, we have less to explain. It was a slight tilting of a balance rather than a vast and revolutionary change from one world view to another. Hence much less of a causal revolution is needed. This new formulation leads us to re-examine the technological argument. Instead of requiring a sudden dramatic improvement in man's physical environment, for instance a 'revolution' in medicine, food production or control of accidents, we would be seeking for a long-term and slow improvement from at least the fourteenth century. We would also be looking at the general level - that is to say, whether the improvement was from an already unusually high level for a 'pre-industrial' society to an even higher one. Finally, we would need to extend our interest outside the rather physical elements of the environment, food, health, fire, to include the political environment.

Let us take first those insecurities which Thomas himself concentrates on. The first is demographic. We have seen that he implies that life was relatively short and uncertain. This is of course true if we compare expectation of life at birth in the seventeenth century with that now. Yet the equations look different if we remember that in terms of survival after the age of one there was really no secular improvement for most of the population before the late nineteenth century. An Elizabethan villager who had reached the age of one had just as good an expectation of life as Robert Koch or Louis Pasteur. This illustrates the second point, that rather than seeing mortality levels in England as incredibly **high** before the demographic revolution of the later nineteenth century, we should in cross-comparative perspective see the levels as surprisingly **low** - a middling plateau which is perfectly compatible with a relatively optimistic and stable attitude towards the future, planning and achievement.

Thomas' second insecurity is food, where he implies that there was widespread shortage, deficiency

³⁹ □ Selden, quoted in Geertz, *Anthropology*, 71

and dearth, if not massive famines. Again, of course, there is something in this. But it is very possible to argue that in relative terms the English were an extraordinarily well fed population and that famine had been banished from all but a corner of the land by the fifteenth century. The light population, efficient agriculture, good communications, early market, temperate climate and other factors protected the population from the vagaries of weather which effect so many 'agrarian' societies. It is not at all difficult to argue that the population of England were as well fed in the sixteenth century as in the nineteenth and in both centuries, apart from Holland, the English were probably the best fed population the world had ever known.

Thomas' third major insecurity is disease. Here again there is a half-truth. It is true that if we compare an English or American after 1950 with an English woman or man in the sixteenth century, then the latter were subjected to numerous forms of disease which have now been eliminated. But again we need to make at least two qualifications. Firstly the changes were gradual and complex, with a rise in certain diseases and decline in others. Again, the situation of the later sixteenth century is not notably worse than that of the early nineteenth; old diseases like plague and leprosy had gone, new diseases like smallpox and cholera were rampant. Secondly, it is possible to argue that in comparison to most pre-industrial settled civilizations, the rates of most diseases were low. It is obviously true that there were widespread illnesses and most people suffered pain with a frequency and intensity which modern westerners would find difficult to bear. Yet the levels were not usually overwhelming. Furthermore, people could point to some improvements; leprosy had vanished, the sweating sickness disappeared after the sixteenth century, venereal disease declined in virulence, plague become localized in cities and later vanished.

Finally, there is accident and misfortune, particularly fire. It is true that fire was a constant hazard, but it is mistaken to overplay its importance. There may even have been early and subtle mechanisms to hedge against its effects, somewhat invisible to the historian, but of the kind which were developed in Japan.

Man's attitude towards the controllability of the external world is affected by many other material, cultural and political factors. In terms of the material, there are the whole set of protections for his body, particularly housing and clothing. Here it can be argued that the English from at least the fourteenth century, and very markedly from the sixteenth, enjoyed levels of affluence and security which were, with the exception of the Dutch, unprecedented. An average Elizabethan was as affluent, well dressed, housed, and fed as an average inhabitant of England in any period up to the late nineteenth century - and far better than in all other world civilizations in history. Looking out from this warmth and physical security, not over-pressed by long work-hours, it is easier to see how people could have some sense of confidence in a reasonably stable, controllable and ultimately comprehensible external world. They could see the improvements around them - better agriculture, new drinks, better cloth production, better housing, the printing press, gunpowder, compass of Bacon's aphorism.

Furthermore, it was not just the immediate private space of the English that had been domesticated, tamed, brought under control - not merely house, garden, food and clothing. As Thomas shows,

following the work of H.C. Darby and historical geographers, the physical landscape had been tamed and ordered very early. The shape of the fields and hedges, of the roads and paths, of the majority of human settlements, had been laid out by the eleventh century and was to change little over the next 700 years. Dangerous wild animals, which still roamed over much of continental Europe or Scotland until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were destroyed very early. In the sixteenth century Harrison thought it one of the important blessings of God on England 'that it is void of noisome beasts, as lions, bears, tigers, pards (leopards), wolves, and suchlike, by means whereof our countrymen may travel in safety and our herds and flocks remain for the most part abroad in the field without any herdmen or keeper.'⁴⁰ He compared this with the situation beyond the Tweed, where fierce animals abounded. The perceived safety of the countryside went back much earlier. In the early thirteenth century the English monk Bartholomaeus Anglicus noted that in England there were 'few wolves or none' and as a result sheep could be securely left 'without ward in pasture and in fields.' This, he said, went back to Anglo-Saxon times, and had been a phenomenon noted by Bede.⁴¹

Even more dangerous than animal predators are human ones, and it is they who usually make it necessary for armed shepherds to guard the flocks. As important as the control of the physical world of nature was the control of human violence through political and legal means, a subject which Thomas largely omits. Here again it would seem that England had been early tamed. England was a unified nation-state in Anglo-Saxon times and the continuing uncertainties, regional uprisings and over-mighty subject were, in the main, eliminated by the strong governments of the Normans and Angevins. Internal warfare and invading armies, which made much of Europe dangerous and led to a weapon-carrying population and the defensive fortifications of nobility and cities up to the nineteenth century, had largely been eliminated by the early medieval period in England. The power of the King's Courts, the absence of a standing army, the freedom from foreign invasions provided by sea boundaries, these and other factors combined to give a very early and continuous peace. The early development of an intricate legal system, monopolization of violence by the State, high level of participation in local administration of justice which are well known features of England back to the Middle Ages are all different facets of this stability.

The contrast with the devastations of France, Germany, Spain or Italy through the centuries is obvious. The differences in political structure would help to explain the curious fact that the English gentry after the fifteenth century were happy to live in undefended manor houses in the country, while in most countries they sheltered within huge chateau fortifications or, preferably, within the city walls. Towns and castles were the refuse of 'civility' and 'civilization' when times were violent, and hence were far more important on the Continent. It is for these reasons that Freeman, for instance, when trying to explain the absence of 'capital' cities in England, ascribed it to political factors. The 'princely' and the 'civic' element show themselves in greater splendour in French rather

⁴⁰ □Harrison, Description, 324

⁴¹ □Anglicus, Properties, ii, 734

than English cities 'simply because in England the kingdom was more united, because the general government was stronger, because the English earl or bishop was not an independent prince, nor the English city an independent commonwealth. ⁴² Edinburgh or Durham were the nearest British equivalents to such a phenomenon.

Although this is a huge topic, it would be a mistake to avoid acknowledging the fact that a final strand of the explanation of the peculiarities undoubtedly lies in the religious system. Keith Thomas, following Weber, rightly lays considerable stress on this. Christianity in general has a curiously ambivalent attitude towards the relations between man and nature. On the one hand it stresses an exploitative attitude; all creatures were made by God for man, and can be used for his own good. On the other hand, all creatures were created by God, and man should respect His creation and see His hand in its beauty. The myth of the Garden of Eden is an aspect of the rural emphasis of the religion. Within Christianity, the proto-Protestant and Protestant versions that dominated England stressed an anti-magical, disenchanted attitude towards nature which Weber noted. Long before the Reformation, many of the uncertainties, mysteries and extensive ritual confusions had been eliminated. An overlap of the material and spiritual worlds common in many cultures was absent. The attack on those popular errors which indicated a fear and awe of nature, the undermining of a belief in divine presences in natural phenomena, had begun long ago under the Anglo-Saxon Church. It was carried to its logical and final limits by Protestantism. An ascetic, anti-magical tendency in Christianity thus fitted with the other forces, political, economic, social, which separated the world of man and nature, bringing nature under absolute control, and then allowing a sentimental re-integration on man's own terms. This disenchantment of the world is the central theme of Thomas's work and he summarizes the process thus: 'in place of a natural world redolent with human analogy and symbolic meaning, and sensitive to man's behaviour, they constructed a detached natural scene to be viewed and studied from the outside.'⁴³

Of course there are other elements of Christianity which are also essential. There is the attitude towards time - many have pointed towards Christianity as an historical religion, moving mankind from an original creation through a long series of stages to a final revelation. This gave a sense of openness and progress.⁴⁴ Or again, the theology suggested an all powerful and seeing God who had laid down a series of 'laws' which it was man's duty to enquire after. This again was propitious. Thirdly, Christianity took a positive, not to say positivistic, attitude towards the physical world. It was there, not an illusion or construct of man's mind, as it tended to become in some forms of Eastern mystical religion, hence precluding serious scientific investigation of the 'natural world' (cf Needham XXX on this).

⁴² □Freeman, Essays, 42

⁴³ □Thomas, Natural World, 89

⁴⁴ □Bury, Progress, XXX

All these features were necessary ingredients. Yet as we can see from the history of certain other Catholic countries such as Spain or Portugal, if combined with a different political and social structure they were not enough to lead into the destruction of magic and ritual and the emergence of 'modern' thought. It is the total assemblage - the increasing material high standard of living and political security as well as the religious tendency that is necessary - in exactly the right mix and over a long period. The roots lie back in north-western Europe from the Middle Ages and we can see them developing, for instance, in England from at least the twelfth century. They are apparent in the work of Bartholomeus Anglicus, Bracton, Roger Bacon, Occam and many others. What we see in the sixteenth to eighteenth century is not a revolutionary change but a growing confidence and extension of earlier tendencies. By a kind of paradoxical miracle by the end of the eighteenth century England was both the same and utterly different from the England of Chaucer, just as full grown oak tree is both different from and the same as an acorn.

The development was not a steady growth of the kind beloved by Whig historians, yet it is, after the event, possible to see a sort of 'progress' in the way in which the balance was tipped. This could be summarized as follows.

Previous chapters have shown that in England many of the causes of insecurity, war, famine and most diseases (except plague) had already been brought under control. Life was tolerably predictable. The violence of men, weather and micro-organisms had already been brought within control. People felt a reasonable sense of confidence in a relatively stable and predictable world. By the fifteenth century the firm underpinning provided by the reasonably efficient administrative system, the good judicial system, the advanced market economy, meant that there was, for an agrarian economy, already an unusually high level of personal security. Magic was only needed at the margins. The area of the 'irrational' was already delimited.

What then happened was that in the sixteenth century all these advantages were increased. The threat of civil war evaporated even more. The integrated market economy spread further. Affluence for the middle groups rose. The Poor Law and administration were improved. Plague declined in virulence and there was a relatively healthy period until the 1620s. By the 1590s the balance had been tipped decisively towards a belief in the controllability of the external world and a sense of optimism and progress was felt, as evidenced by William Harrison, for example. Things were improving. Man could raise himself.

The set-backs in the 1590s and 1620s momentarily halted this process, but the tide was already flowing fast. After the 1650s, the founding of the Royal Society and other institutions, and the work of Boyle, Hooke, Newton and others made rapid progress. Confidence rose as conditions improved. The world of Defoe is considerably more complex and sophisticated than the world of Harrison or Camden. As people looked back, they could feel a real sense of discovery and progress, not only over the recent past, but even when compared with the glorious attainments of Greece or Rome. All this was a necessary, if not sufficient, basis for the disenchantment of the world.