In the first four talks in this series, we have been surveying four episodes in which our western civilisation has been encountered by some contemporary non-western society. Russia’s, Islam’s, India’s and the Far East’s experiences of the west have come under view. Our survey has shown that these four different experiences of being hit by a foreign civilisation have had a number of features in common; and I want here to pick out, for further examination, several features that are, I believe, characteristic, not only of the contemporary world’s encounters with the west, but of all such collisions between one civilisation and another. There seems to be something like a common psychology of encounters; and this is a subject of practical interest and importance today, when the sudden ‘annihilation of distance’, through the achievements of our western technology, has brought face to face, at point blank range, half a dozen societies, each of which, until yesterday, was living its own life in its own way almost as independently of its neighbours as if each society had been marooned on a planet of its own instead of living in the same world with the other representatives of its kind.

Technology instead of Religion
Let us start with the general point which came to our notice last week when we were taking a comparative view of our western civilisation’s two successive assaults upon China and Japan. We saw that, on the first occasion, the west tried to induce the far eastern peoples to adopt the western way of life in its entirety, including its religion as well as its technology, and that this attempt did not succeed. And then we saw that, in the second act of the play, the west offered to the same far eastern peoples a secularised excerpt from the western civilisation in which religion had been left out and technology, instead of religion, had been made the central feature; and we observed that this technological splinter, which had been flaked off from the religious core of our civilisation towards the end of the seventeenth century, did succeed in pushing its way into the life of a far eastern society that had previously repulsed an attempt to introduce the western way of life en bloc, technology and all, including religion.

Here we have an example of something that seems often to happen when the culture-ray of what one might call a radio-active civilisation hits a foreign body social. The assaulted foreign body’s resistance diffracts the culture-ray into its component strands, just as a light-ray is diffracted into the spectrum by the resistance of a prism. In optics we also know that some of the light-strands in the spectrum have a greater penetrative power than others, and we have already seen that it is the same with the component strands of a culture-ray. In the west’s impact on the far east, the technological strand in the radiation of the western civilisation has overcome a resistance by which the religious strand has been repelled; and this difference in the
penetrative power of a religious and a technological culture-strand is not something that is peculiar to the history of the relations between these two particular civilisations. We have stumbled here upon an instance of one of the ‘laws’ of cultural radiation.

When a travelling culture-ray is diffracted into its component strands—technology, religion, politics, art, and so on—by the resistance of a foreign body social upon which it has impinged, its technological strand is apt to penetrate faster and farther than its religious strand; and this law can be formulated in more general terms. The penetrative power of a strand of cultural radiation is usually in inverse ratio to this strand’s cultural value. A trivial strand arouses less resistance in the assaulted body social than is aroused by a crucial strand, because the trivial strand does not threaten to cause so violent or so painful a disturbance of the assaulted body’s traditional way of life. This automatic selection of the most trivial elements in a radio-active culture for the widest dissemination abroad is obviously an unfortunate rule of the game of cultural intercourse; but this premium on triviality is not the game’s worst point. The very process of diffraction, which is of the essence of the game, threatens to poison the life of the society whose body social is being penetrated by the diverse strands of a diffracted culture-ray.

Analogies taken from physics and medicine may be used to illustrate this point. Since our discovery of the trick of splitting the atom, we have learned to our cost that the particles composing an atom of some inoffensive element cease to be innocuous and become dangerously corrosive so soon as they have been split off from the orderly society of particles of which an atom is constituted, and have been sent flying by themselves on independent careers of their own. We have learned, too—not to our own cost in this case, but to the cost of the once secluded surviving representative of primitive man—that a disease which is a mild one for us, because it has been rife among us so long that we have developed an effective resistance to it, may prove deadly to South Sea Islanders who have been exempt from it before being suddenly exposed to it by the arrival among them of its European carriers.

A loose strand of cultural radiation, like a loose electron or a loose contagious disease, may prove deadly when it is disengaged from the system within which it has been functioning hitherto and is set free to range abroad by itself in a different milieu. In its original setting, this culture-strand or bacillus or electron was restrained from working havoc because it was kept in order by its association with other components of a pattern in which the diverse participants were in equilibrium. In escaping from its original setting, the liberated particle, bacillus, or culture-strand will not have changed its nature; but the same nature will produce a deadly effect, instead of a harmless one, now that the creature has broken loose from its original associations. In these circumstances, ‘one man’s meat’ may become ‘another man’s poison’.

In the set of encounters between the world and the west which is the subject of these talks, there is a classical example of the mischief that an institution can do when it is prised loose from its original social setting and is sent out into the world, conquering and to conquer, all by itself. During the last century and a half we have seen our late modern western political institution of ‘national states’ burst the bounds of its birthplace in western Europe and blaze a trail of persecution, eviction, and massacre, as it has spread abroad into eastern Europe, south-west Asia, and India—all of them
regions where ‘national states’ were not part and parcel of an indigenous social system but were an exotic institution which was deliberately imported from the west, not because it had been found by experimentation to be suitable to the local conditions of these non-western worlds, but simply because the west’s political power had given the west’s political institutions an irrational yet irresistible prestige in non-western eyes. The havoc which the application of this western institution of ‘national states’ has worked in these regions, where it is an exotic import, is incomparably greater than the damage that the same institution has done in Britain, France, and the other west European countries in which it has been not an artificially introduced innovation but a spontaneous native growth.

A Natural Product Transplanted

We can see why the same institution has had these strikingly different effects in these two different social environments. The institution of ‘national states’ has been comparatively harmless in western Europe for the same reason that accounts for its having originated there; and that is because, in western Europe, it corresponds to the local relation between the distribution of languages and the alignment of political frontiers. In western Europe, people speaking the same language happen, in most cases, to be huddled together in a single continuous and compact block of territory with a fairly well defined boundary separating it from the similarly compact domains of other languages; and, in a region where, as here, the languages are thus distributed in the pattern of a patchwork quilt, the language map provides a convenient basis for the political map, and ‘national states’ are therefore natural products of the social milieu. Most of the domains of the historic states of Western Europe do, in fact, coincide approximately with homogeneous patches of the language map; and this coincidence has come about, for the most part, undesignedly. The west European peoples have not been acutely conscious of the process by which their political containers have been moulded on linguistic lasts; and, accordingly, the spirit of nationalism has been, on the whole, easy-going in its west European homeland. In west European national states, linguistic minorities who have found themselves on the wrong side of a political frontier have in most cases shown loyalty, and been treated with consideration, because their coexistence with the majority speaking ‘the national language’ as fellow-citizens of the same commonwealth has been a historical fact which has therefore been taken for granted by everyone.

But now consider what has happened when this west European institution of ‘national states’, which in its birthplace has been a natural product of the local linguistic map, has been radiated abroad into regions in which the local language map is On a quite different pattern. When we look at a language map, not just of Western Europe, but of the world, we see that the local west European pattern, in which the languages are distributed in fairly clear-cut, compact, and homogeneous blocks, is something rather peculiar and exceptional. In the vastly larger area stretching south-eastward from Danzig and Trieste to Calcutta and Singapore, the pattern of the language map is not like a patchwork quilt; it is like a shot-silk robe. In eastern Europe, south-west Asia, India, and Malaya the speakers of different languages are not neatly sorted out from one another, as they are in western Europe; they are geographically intermingled in alternate houses on the same streets of the same towns and villages; and, in this different, and more normal, social setting, the language map—in which the threads of different colours are interwoven with each other—provides a convenient basis, not for
the drawing of frontiers between states, but for the allocation of occupations and trades among individuals.

Macedoine into Patchwork

In the Ottoman Empire 150 years ago, before the western institution of clear-cut, compact, homogeneous national states made its disastrous entry into this foreign arena, the Turks were peasants and administrators, the Lazes were sailors, the Greeks were sailors and shop-keepers, the Armenians were bankers and shop-keepers, the Bulgars were grooms and market-gardeners, the Albanians were masons and mercenary soldiers, the Kurds were shepherds and porters, the Vlachs were shepherds and peddlars. The nationalities were not only intermingled as a matter of geographical fact; they were also economically and socially interdependent; and this correspondence between nationalities and occupations was the order of nature in a world in which the language map was not a patchwork, but a Macedoine. In this Ottoman world, the only way of carving out national states on the western pattern was to transform the native Macedoine into a patchwork on the language pattern of western Europe; and this could be done only by the methods of barbarism which, for 150 years past, have in fact been employed with devastating results in one section after another of an area extending all the way from the Sudetenland to eastern Bengal. So great can be the havoc worked by an idea or institution or technique when it is cut loose from its original setting and is radiated abroad, by itself, into a social environment in which it conflicts with the historic local pattern of social life.

The truth is that every historic culture-pattern is an organic whole in which all the parts are interdependent, so that, if any part is prised out of its setting, both the isolated part and the mutilated whole behave differently from their behaviour when the pattern is intact. This is why ‘one man’s meat’ can be ‘another man’s poison’; and another consequence is that ‘one thing leads to another’. If a splinter is flaked off from one culture and is introduced into a foreign body social, this isolated splinter will tend to draw after it, into the foreign body in which it has lodged, the other component elements of the social system in which this splinter is at home and from which it has been forcibly and unnaturally detached. The broken pattern tends to reconstitute itself in a foreign environment into which one of its components has once found its way.

If we want to see how, in the game of cultural intercourse, this process of one thing leading to another works in practice, let us look at one or two concrete examples. In a United Kingdom Blue Book surveying the social and economic state of Egypt in 1839, it is mentioned that in the city of Alexandria at this date the principal maternity hospital was located within the precincts of the naval arsenal. This sounds odd, but we shall see that it was inevitable as soon as we retrace the sequence of events that led to this at first sight surprising result.

By the year 1839 the Ottoman governor-general of Egypt, the celebrated Mehmed Au Pasha, had been working for thirty-two years to equip himself with effective armaments in the western style of his generation. He was determined to have a navy composed of warships on the contemporary western model. So Mehmed Ali advertised for western experts; but western applicants were unwilling to sign contracts without being sure of being able to bring their families to Egypt with them; and they...
were unwilling to bring their families without being sure of there being suitable
provision for the care of their health up to contemporary western standards of medical
service. So Mehmed Ali found that he could not hire his urgently required western
naval experts without also hiring western doctors of medicine to attend on the naval
experts’ wives and children. Doctors and experts and their wives and families all
arrived from the west together; the experts duly installed the arsenal, and the doctors
duly attended on the women and children in the new western community at
Alexandria; but, when the doctors had done all their duty by their western patients,
they found that they still had some working time on their hands; and, being the
energetic and public-spirited medical practitioners that they were, they resolved to do
something for the local Egyptian population as well. With what should they begin?
Maternity work was obviously the first call. So a maternity hospital arose within the
precincts of the naval arsenal by a train of events which, as you will now recognise,
was inevitable.

The moral of this story is the speed with which, in cultural intercourse, one thing can
lead to another, and the revolutionary length to which the process may go. Within the
lifetime of all concerned, the traditional seclusion of Moslem women from contact
with men outside their own household had still been so strictly enforced that, in
eighteenth-century Turkey, even when one of the Sultan’s most dearly beloved wives
was so ill that her life was in danger, the most that the Islamic code of manners would
allow a western doctor to do for this precious imperial patient was just to feel the
pulse of a hand held out timidly between the tightly drawn curtains of the invisible
lady’s bed. This was the nearest that a western physician had been permitted to
approach a patient whose life was one of the principal treasures of a ruler who was
deemed to be an autocrat. In those days the Sultan’s autocracy had been impotent to
override a traditional Islamic social convention, even in a matter of life and death
which was next to the so-called autocrat’s heart. And now, within the same lifetime,
Moslem women were boldly venturing inside the precincts of an outlandish arsenal to
avail themselves of the services of infidel western obstetricians. This dire breach with
the traditional Islamic conceptions of decency in the social relations between the
sexes had been a consequence of the Pasha of Egypt’s decision to equip himself with
a navy in the western style; and this undesigned and, at first sight, remote social effect
had followed its technological cause within the span of less than half a lifetime.

A Continuous Process
This piece of social history, which is piquant but not unrepresentative, gives the
measure of the degree to which those nineteenth-century Ottoman statesmen were
deluding themselves when they imagined that they would be able to fit their country
out with adequate western armament and then to arrest the process of westernisation
at that point. It was not till the time of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, in our own day, that
the Osmanlis admitted to themselves the truth that, in the game of cultural intercourse,
one thing is bound to go on leading to another until the adoption of western weapons,
drill, and uniforms will inevitably bring in its train not only the emancipation of
Moslem women but the replacement of the Arabic by the Latin alphabet and the
disestablishment of an Islamic church which, in Moslem countries in the past, has
reigned unchallenged over the whole field of life.
In our own day in India, President Ataturk’s great Hindu contemporary, the Mahatma Gandhi, did realise that, in cultural intercourse, one thing insidiously leads to another. Gandhi saw, that a myriad threads of cotton—grown in India, perhaps, but spun in Lancashire and woven there into clothes for India’s people—were threatening to entangle India with the western world in gossamer meshes that might soon be as hard to break as if they had been steel fetters. Gandhi saw that if Hindus went on wearing clothes made by western machinery in the west, they would soon take to using the same western machinery in India for the same purpose. First, they would import jennies and power-looms from England; then they would learn how to build these implements for themselves; next they would be leaving their fields in order to work in their new Indian cotton-mills and Indian foundries; and, when they had become used to spending their working time doing western jobs, they would take to spending their leisure on western amusements movies, talkies, greyhound racing, and the rest—till they would find themselves growing western souls and forgetting how to be Hindus.

With a prophet’s vision, the Mahatma saw this grain of cotton-seed waxing into a great tree whose spreading branches would overshadow a continent; and this Hindu prophet called upon his Hindu countrymen to save their Hindu souls by laying an axe to this rank western tree’s roots. He set them the example of spending a certain time every day on spinning and weaving Indian cotton by hand, in the old-fashioned Indian way, for Indian bodies to wear, because he saw that this severance of the original economic ties between India and the west was the only sure means of saving the Hindu society from going western, body and soul.

There was no flaw in the Mahatma Gandhi’s insight. The westernisation of India that he foreboded and sought to avert was, and is, fast developing out of that one original grain of cotton-seed; and Gandhi’s remedy for India’s western infection was the right one. Only the prophet failed to induce his disciples to follow him in preserving India’s cultural independence at this price in economic austerity. The wearing of machine-made cotton goods could not have been renounced by the Indian people in Gandhi’s generation without lowering the Indian peasantry’s already intolerably low standard of living, and without putting out of business altogether the new classes of Indian cotton operatives and Indian mill-owners that had already sprung up from India’s soil in Bombay and in Gandhi’s own native city, Ahmadabad. Gandhi has made an immense and perhaps permanent mark on the history of India and of the world; but the irony of history has condemned him to make this mark not by saving India from economic westernisation but by speeding her along the path of political westernisation through leading her triumphantly to the western political goal of national self-government. Even Gandhi’s genius was no match for the remorseless working of a social ‘law’. In a cultural encounter, one thing inexorably goes on leading to another when once the smallest breach has been made in the assaulted society’s defences.

You will have realised by now, if you did not know this all the time, that the reception of a foreign culture is a painful as well as a hazardous undertaking; and the victim’s instinctive repugnance to innovations that threaten to upset his traditional way of life makes the experience all the worse for him; for, by kicking against the pricks, he diffracts the impinging foreign culture-ray into its component strands; he then gives a grudging admission to the most trivial, and therefore least upsetting, of these poisonous splinters of a foreign way of life, in the hope of being able to get off with no further concessions than just that and then, as one thing inevitably leads to another, he finds himself compelled to admit the rest of the intruding culture piecemeal. No
wonder that the victim’s normal attitude towards an intrusive alien culture is a self-defeating attitude of opposition and hostility.

In the course of these talks we have had occasion to notice some of the statesmen in non-western countries hit by the west who have had the rare vision to see that a society which is under fire from the radiation of a more potent foreign culture must either master this foreign way of life or perish. The figures of Peter the Great, Selim III, Mahmud II, Mehmed Au, Mustafa Kemal, and the ‘Elder Statesmen’ of Japan in the Meiji era have passed before our eyes. This positive and constructive response to the challenge of cultural aggression is a proof of statesmanship because it is a victory over natural inclinations. The natural response is the negative one of the oyster who closes his shell, the tortoise who withdraws into his carapace, the hedgehog who curls himself up into a spiky ball, the ostrich who hides his head in the sand, and there are classical examples of this alternative reaction in the history of both Russia’s and Islam’s encounters with the west.

The policy of learning how to fight an aggressive alien civilisation with its own weapons will arouse deep misgivings in conservative minds. Are not your Peters and your Mustafa Kemals really selling the fort under pretext of bringing its defences up to date? Is not the right retort to the intrusion of an alien culture a resolute determination to boycott the accursed thing? If we scrupulously obey every jot and tittle of the holy law that has been laid upon us by the God of our fathers, will He not be moved to put forth the almighty power of His right arm for our defence against our infidel enemies? In Russia this was the reaction of the Old Believers, who suffered martyrdom for the sake of minute, and in foreign eyes trifling, points of ecclesiastical ritual; and in the Islamic world this was the reaction of the Wahhabis, Sanusis, Idrisis, Mahdists, and other puritanical sects who came charging out of the desert on God’s war-path against apostate Osmanlis who, in the fanatics’ eyes, had betrayed Islam by going the western way.

Mohammed Ahmad, the Sudanese fanatic, is the antithesis of Peter the Russian technocrat; but neither the mastering of a new-fangled alien technology nor a zeal for the preservation of a traditional way of life is the last word in reply to the challenge of an assaulting alien civilisation. If we are to read what this last word is, we must look ahead to a chapter of the story which, in the unfinished history of the world’s encounter with the west, is today still hidden in the future. We can supply this missing chapter if we turn to the history of the world’s encounter with the Greeks and Romans; for in the record of this episode, the scroll of history has already been unrolled from beginning to end, so that the whole of this older book now lies open for our inspection. Our future can perhaps be deciphered in this record of a Graeco-Roman past. Let us see what we can make of this Graeco-Roman record next week.