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Antifragile: The Roaring Twenties in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* and *the Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

In my paper I have tried to bring together the idea of Nassim Nicholas Taleb's Antifragile, a short history of the First World War and the American Roaring Twenties through the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald to show that the Lost Generation of The Roaring Twenties made a convex reaction to the crisis of War. The paper shows that the Great War was a 'Black Swan', an event that initially lay beyond the scope of our anticipation, but no matter how terrible it was U.S.A. was the only country that emerged out of it rather stronger and more powerful than the other nations involved in it. The paper also makes suggestions through the commentaries on the sections of Fitzgerald's novels that The Roaring Twenties which was a strange American phenomenon was also a labyrinth that would eventually engulf the generation in catastrophe of the Wall Street Crash, but the central thesis of the paper remains unchanged that the American society became Antifragile as The Roaring Twenties appeared immediately after the War.

Keywords: Antifragile, Lost Generation, *the Great Gatsby*, *This Side of Paradise*, WWI, the Roaring Twenties, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Black Swan

1. Introduction

The Twentieth century began with the promise of a revolutionary advancement in technology and communications based on the inexorable progress of natural science. Looking back upon the long nineteenth century with the endless concatenation of unbroken advancements in human life, mankind contemplated a new century full of infinite dreams. The dream, however, lasted for only fourteen years. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June, 1914 followed by Austria's declaration of war against Serbia exactly a month later shaped the history of the twentieth century. The twentieth century was wrenched away from allegiance with the previous centuries, floated adrift, anchorless, like a historic landscape, ruled by modern imperial barbarians. Therefore, with the coming of the First World War, 1914 gave birth to the 'age of massacre' (Singer, 1972). The War led to the collapse of the pillars of previous conventions of socio-cultural relationships. People felt the snapping of all links between generations, signified by the demolition in the fabric of the past and the present. The term 'peace', now came to be associated with the time before 1914 (Hobsbawm, 22), while the generation that came of age between the WWI and the Roaring Twenties was labelled as Lost. But according to Samuel Hynes 'Lost' did not mean – "vanished but disoriented, wandering, directionless" accompanied by a sense of pandemonium and utter aimlessness (1990,386). This generation whose origin was rooted in the late nineteenth century crossed the continents for the first time in history, to participate in a war whose magnitude of future consequences and bloodbath neither could they comprehend, nor the nations' mobilization of public opinions for megalomaniac political aims could they discern. The 'total war' was waged for unlimited aims (Hobsbawm, 29), where the American Lost Generation participated actively, although reluctantly, unlike their enthusiastic Allies. The WWI was unique because between 1865 and 1914 no major power¹

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¹ The eight major powers constituted six European nations – Britain, France, Russia, Germany, Italy and Austria-Hungary – and two other were U.S.A. and Japan. See: Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* (1995, 22-23).

fought another outside its immediate territory by crossing the volatile frontier. Although there has been a series of war between France and Britain in the eighteenth century, the Crimean War (1854-56), the American Civil War (1861-65), the Mexican-American War (1846-48), the Spanish-American War (1898), even the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), which Piotr Olender called “the first great war of the 20th century” (2010,233), but sadly as Hobsbawm claimed – there “had been no *world* wars at all” (Hobsbawm, 23). For the first time troops came from overseas outside their domain in unknown lands to fight and to provide reinforcements. Australians and New Zealanders fought on the Gallipoli peninsula, Indians were sent to Europe and the Middle East, Chinese battalions to the West, while Africans, Canadians, and Americans fought in French army.

The most significant event that shaped the destiny of the Lost Generation was the rejection of George Washington’s non-intervention policy, which would later become the Monroe Doctrine. After the German U-boat U-20 sunk the Cunard liner *Lusitania* on May 1915, the Germans violated the cruiser rules time and again by torpedoing next the British liner, the *Arabic*, and the French Channel Cruiser, the *Sussex* on June 1915 and March 1916 eventually, even after the bitter caveat from President Woodrow Wilson who demanded that all merchant vessels, whether neutral or hostile should be treated accordingly. But it was the interception and the publication of the *Zimmerman Telegram* on 1 March, 1917 that accelerated the United States’ entry into the War on 6 April, 1917. Henceforward the Lost Generation was scarred by the memories of war, as it would live and think in terms of the world war (Hobsbawm, 22). The publication and the aftermath of the *Zimmerman Telegram* paled in comparison with the repercussions of the sinking of *Lusitania*. The event crushed the homogeneity of American nationalist aims and unleashed the plague of dual sentiments, of two-ness within the system. Woodrow Wilson observed that after the sinking of *Lusitania* Americans had a double wish: to preserve the national interest and to maintain the stance of non-entanglement that would prevent hostilities (Stevenson [2012]2005, 315). This aspect of two-ness eventually engulfed everything, especially after the war. People experienced new sentiments during and after they returned from the fronts, as two ‘warring ideals’ firmly possessed them. Consciousness, behaviour, role and identity were placed on a magnetic field with two diametrically opposite forces activated simultaneously; and none other than F. Scott Fitzgerald portrayed it more vividly.

The treatment of duality and paradoxes of the Great War in *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Great Gatsby* (1926) delineates how the generation was lost in the din of Roaring Twenties, but eventually became antifragile. The fabric of perception was painted by a double vision of everything.

Amory Blaine is torn between love and war, and is lost in his attempt to create an identity within and outside his generation. This urge to demarcate himself from the “generation” is driven by the need to live by “a code”, which he formulated at the age of thirteen, and to identify himself as a “personage” – as one who is “never thought of apart from what he has done”, as one who “gathers”. He must “gather” all the essential materials to find order in a disordered world much in the same way as Gatsby ventures to formulate his SCHEDULE and GENERAL RESOLVES (printed in capital) at the back cover of his *Hopalong Cassidy*. The love affairs as the pivot of the novels are

heavily wrought with doubleness of courage and cowardice through the characters of Gatsby, Amory, Rosalind and Daisy. Some of the ideas that were sowed in *This Side of Paradise* ripened in *The Great Gatsby*. Amory calls himself a “cynical idealist” and much to our surprise the epistemological progression of the narrative of *Gatsby* is woven by Nick’s overt cynicism and Gatsby’s covert idealism (Chatterjee, 2015). For the narcissistic Amory the self is its own origin, where others become a “mirror” or sometimes merely a mood canvas. The constant self-love outside the self in someone or something else turns quite catastrophic in *Gatsby*. Nick ruminates that “Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself” (Fitzgerald [2000]1926, 95). Then the real, ideal Gatsby in the Platonic sense of the word is – “a son of God”, while the earthly flesh and blood “man called Gatsby” is – a “poor-son-of-a-bitch”. Amory foresaw that the Lost Generation will echo “the old cries” and learn “the old creeds, through a revery of long days and nights” and will finally “go out into that dirty gray turmoil to follow love and pride” with the generation doubly dedicated to the “fear of poverty” and “the worship of success” (Fitzgerald [2000] 1920, 259). Amory views the end of the war as – “the entrance of a labyrinth” – the gateway to the Roaring Twenties where the generation would refuse to carry a thread and eventually get lost. Deep into the bosom of this labyrinth of plethora Gatsby finds himself unlike Amory both a soldier and a lover. Gatsby fell in love during the war, but war refused to dis sever its ties with his socio-personal life, or even with his identity. Gatsby’s present is divided by: the sporadic excursions into the time of war and the herculean effort to catapult into an elusive future through the tunnel of the “green light”. Ideals had a precarious situation in the world of the Twenties, “growing up to find all gods dead” the generation experienced a double vision of their ideal either in the form of God or Devil. Gatsby – the “son of God” reveals “God’s truth” to Nick; while Amory finds his hero Dick Humbrid metamorphose into a terrible phantasm, the devil, and as Umberto Eco said – “the Devil is God Himself” (Eco [1986] 1984, 37). Therefore the War that apotheosized Major Gatsby “For Valour Extraordinary” as Great has on the other hand demonized the infinitely courageous aristocrat – Humbrid.

The temporal location of the Lost Generation is between the Great War and the Roaring Twenties; it was unique in itself for being both – the last generation to sever all ties from the past, and – the first generation to undergo a social sea-change by embracing certain cultural shocks. This made things even more complicated, as the Twenties was a ramification of the War, it refused to shred its past accoutrements, hence the incomplete projects resurrected even more violently in these antifragile years.

What made the Twenties antifragile was the WWI itself, with all its dualities and twoness-es. The ‘roar’ of the Twenties was a singular gift that was granted by WWI to America. The Lost Generation saw a remarkable transition as it became a palpable nexus between the ghastly ‘storm of steel’ and the poetic ‘Storm of Summer’². The Twenties was a

² Ernst Jünger’s deadly description of the trench warfare in his 1920 novel *Storm of Steel* is juxtaposed with the poem written by Amory to Eleanor – ‘Summer Storm’, or Storm of Summer in *This Side of Paradise* to deduce the common inherent sentiment of “fading” and “falling” (222).

phenomenon that survived the horrors of the trenches and evolved while European nations crumbled. Nassim Nicholas Taleb explains this phenomenon in his book 'Antifragile'. The central thesis of Taleb's work is how "organic" or "complex" systems react under "The Extended Disorder Family". This extended 'Disorder Family' includes the sixteen essential malevolent entities:

- i. Uncertainty,
- ii. Variability,
- iii. Imperfect, incomplete knowledge,
- iv. Chance,
- v. Chaos,
- vi. Volatility,
- vii. Disorder,
- viii. Entropy,
- ix. Time,
- x. The unknown,
- xi. Randomness,
- xii. Turmoil,
- xiii. Stressor,
- xiv. Error,
- xv. Dispersion of outcomes, and
- xvi. Unknowledge (Taleb, 2012, 13).

The Antifragile for Taleb are things that benefit from shocks; they thrive and grow under disorder, uncertainty and stressors. It is "beyond resilience or robustness", the resilient resists the shock and stays the same, while the antifragile evolves and gets better (Taleb, 2012, 3). 'Fragile', 'Robust' and 'Antifragile' from left to right form the "degrees on a spectrum" (Taleb, 2012, 4) and are together known as the "Triad" (See: Fig. 1). The fragile wants to be left alone in tranquillity, the robust remains the same, and it attains equilibrium quickly, but the antifragile grows, it self-heals and self-repairs from a random disorder unlike the rest. In the light of Taleb's philosophy then we can see that the Roaring Twenties was antifragile – it evolved from the randomness of the War.

David Thomson in *Europe since Napoleon* observes that the War was "unsought, un-intended and a product of a long sequence of events which began in 1871"³. Taleb calls random, unintended events like wars – "Black Swan", and a Black Swan has three properties: first, it is – an "outlier" – it lies outside our realm of regular expectations and therefore cannot be predicted accurately; second, its effects are extreme; and third, it is analysed only after it has occurred, through "a retrospective predictability" (Taleb [2010] 2007, xxii). Wars are supposed to be detrimental but historians observed that the First World War was by far the most lucrative event ever took place for America. Hobsbawm in *The Age of Extremes* writes that in both the First and the Second World War, United States benefited from being isolated from fighting, acting as the main arsenal for its allies, and from the capacity of its economy to "organize the expansion of production more effectively than any other" nation (Hobsbawm [1995] 1994, 48).

The "post-traumatic growth" and the over compensative nature of the American society in the Twenties have made it antifragile. The United States emerged from their reluctant participation in the war as the "economic lord of the world", who began as debtor, but ended as the main international lender. Economically, it became the premium exporting

nation of the world, and second to Great Britain, the premium importing nation. Hollywood monopolized the international movie market and its contribution to the national income was incomparable to any other country (Hobsbawm, 1995, 97-100). The Roaring Twenties can then be seen as the Hydra according to Taleb, and Ovid writes in *Metamorphoses* –

"Destruction caused it to grow, as it put forth

branches of vipers sprung from the carnage" (9. 72-73, 342). America's visible growth from destruction had its roots in the production of war materials for its allies. The society went through a seismic rearrangement as orders poured in from all over the European major countries as the economy "felt a surge of prosperity" (Stokesbury [2008] 1981, 108). In 1918 French steel purchases increased thirty times, and petroleum purchases ten times than 1913 level (Stevenson, 2012, 453). In 1929 U.S.A. produced over 42% of total world output; its steel production rose by about one quarter between 1913 and 1920, as in the rest of the world it fell by about one third (Hobsbawm, 1995, 97). With the rise of Americanism and Fordism the tectonic plate of the culture shifted for ten years, until the nation collapsed in the 1929 quake of the Wall Street. The proliferation of cheap automobiles produced by Ford, General Motors and Plymouth-Dodge changed the whole scenario of the generation as it tried to mass-produce the inexpensive automobiles to the less affluent (Carlisle, 2009, x). Auxiliary effects were gargantuan, as large scale infrastructural developments took shape. The spread of tourist houses, roadside diners, motels, remote speakeasies, and juke joints introduced the American 'fast life', while hamburgers and hot-dogs became the symbols of the cult. The Lost Generation soon became a cornucopia of insurmountable pleasures; it contained – the 'flapper generation' of women to vote for the first time under the Nineteenth Amendment, the 'knee' previously unexposed in the public, for the first time became a sexualized part of the body that were roughed to attract attention(Carlisle, 2009, 5); radio and television commercialized sports and entertainment, and for the first time professional sportspersons became active characters in literary fictions, like the golfer Jordan Baker, the footballer Tom Buchanan and Amory Blaine, and the boxer Robert Cohn (from Hemingway's *Fiesta*); and thanks to the cheap automobiles, courtship now turned into dating, the automobile became a getaway vehicle from parental surveillance for the 'flaming youth', dating was an "end unto itself" and aimed at a relationship beyond marriage (Carlisle, 2009, 8). This reminds us of Jordan Baker's recollection of Daisy and Gatsby's first engrossing dating site – the "white roadster" parked beside the kerb. Homosexuality for the first time in American history enjoyed a certain amount of freedom and acceptance, as the so-called "pansy bars" established in every major city allowed public to involve in discussions about homosexual practices (Carlisle, 2009, 7). In short, the centralization of the industrial firms led to social conformism, which helped to expand America's imperial aims. Brian Landers observed that as "Ford and General Motors became an established part of global commerce, the ideology of corporatism continued to evolve" ([2011] 2009, 403).

Thus, America's post-war economic response according to Taleb was – "convex" (See: Fig. 2). The market economy and society, although man-made, evolved to attain a distinct

³ As quoted in *A History of the Modern World: An Outline* (2012) by Ranjan Chakrabarti.

entity and self-organization in the Twenties, which Taleb called – “biological” – in the sense that they” multipl [ied] and replicate [d]” on their own (Taleb, 2012, 56). But Convexity remains an essence of the antifragile, and the antifragile by all means is “biological”, whereby the system regenerates itself from shocks through adaption. The sufferings are minor, while the gains are tremendous.

For example – the Red Scare and Anarchist bombings by Galleanists (1919-20), the frequent cases of polio and smallpox diseases, the Seattle General Strike (February, 1919), the Great Steel Strike (September, 1919), the ‘Black Sox Scandal’ (1919), the Great Railroad Strike (1922), and the Ku Klux Klan attack on Afro-American, Catholics and Jews (1926) were but occasional friction in the social engine that existed for a short while as compared to the previously mentioned events of the boom, which also included the Miami Real Estate Boom, the spread of urban electrification, newly engineered air-conditioned movie theatres, and increased awareness and availability of contraceptives and prophylaxis for the youth.

The phenomenal boom of the Twenties in America that was spawned from its ‘convex’ reactions to the Great War confounded the rest of the world. As the United States evolved and became antifragile, Britain destroyed its economy by waging a war “beyond its resources” (Hobsbawm, 1995, 30), Germany spent the entire decade paying for the war reparations from the apparently sympathetic ‘Dawes Plan’ of 1924, Russia grew up in isolation, as France hankered with the Germans to fulfil its ‘policy’. Some may argue that America did not suffer heavy loses as the other European countries due to its very short participation in the war, in which case it is still considered antifragile due to the hormetic outcome. Hormesis was first scientifically described by the German toxicologist, Hugo Schulz, who noted that small doses of poison stimulate the growth of yeast, while larger doses are detrimental (Taleb, 2012, 37), thus a small dose of Great War acted as a medicine to benefit the nation.

The age that was considered as an “American phenomenon”, for the Europeans soon became a “weird American extravagance” (Gramsci [2014]1994, 293). Thus, the generation that entered ‘the war to end all wars’ emerged not only victorious, but by further distorting the natural patterns of world production and trade (Kennedy [1989] 1988, 361) metamorphosed and grew like a Hydra of the age – until Heracles arrived on 29 October, 1929.

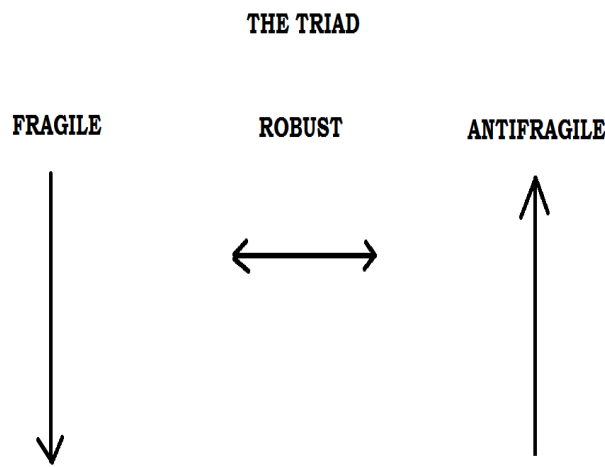


Fig 1:

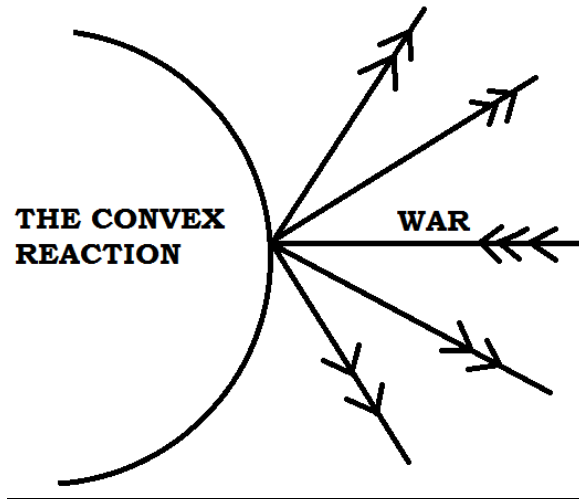


Fig 2:

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