

ENVIRONMENTALISM AND TOTALITARIANISM: AN OBITUARY FOR MODERN 'LIBERALISM'

CHRIS R. TAME



The publication in 1974 of Robert L. Heilbroner's essay "The Human Prospect" (firstly in *The New York Review of Books* and then in book form)¹ passed with little, if any, critical comment. It has remained a standard work of "ecological" advocacy and has been re-published in a second edition. The lack of any rigorous critique is extremely regrettable since we find in this work perhaps one of the most striking — and horrifying — revelations of the character of contemporary 'liberalism'. I am, of course, using the term 'liberalism' as it is now used by most of its contemporary advocates (especially in America), as the name of an ideology of state intervention, 'social control' and planning, i.e. as a variant of socialism. It is an historical irony that originally liberalism meant an ideology of social and economic freedom, of individual liberty and the free market. This strange appropriation of the name of a libertarian movement by its opponents is usually justified by modern 'liberals' on the grounds that they seek the social welfare, enlightenment, progress and prosperity which were the goals of classical liberalism — but that they seek them by the 'positive' and 'scientific' means of state action, rather than by the 'negative' and obviously 'out-moded' means of *laissez-faire*. It is in this intellectual context that Heilbroner's work takes on special significance.

While less known to the general public than, say, J. K. Galbraith, Heilbroner is undoubtedly one of the major academic exponents of modern 'liberalism'.² A prolific writer, he is the author of countless essays and numerous books such as *Between Capitalism and Socialism*, *The Economic Problem*, *The Future As History*, *A Primer on Government Spending*, *The Making of Economic Society*, *The Worldly Philosophers*, *The Limits of American Capitalism*, and *Marxism: For and Against*, all of which represent influential and Simon-pure examples of modern statist 'liberalism'. But what, then, makes his essay "The Human Prospect" especially worthy of note? The answer is that it represents a candid confession that 'liberalism' has failed, that it cannot sustain a life of liberty and prosperity for the masses. It constitutes, in essence, liberalism's self-penned ideological obituary.

The Environment and the Future

"The Human Prospect" is an attempt to answer the question "Is there hope for man?", not, to be sure, in theological terms, but in the most basically material: has man a future on Earth? Thus, the first part of the essay is devoted to a repetition of the most pessimistic predictions of the 'environmentalist' movement. The distortions, fallacies, and confusions

of the contemporary prophets of environmental doom have been extensively analysed and criticised by a number of scholars and little further comment is needed here. Suffice it to say that it has been shown what is valid and what is specious in the writings about the 'environmental crisis', and how the libertarian system of the free market and universal property rights can resolve any of the *genuine* problems or dangers described therein.³ Heilbroner, however, accepts the most pessimistic 'environmentalist' case *in toto*. In his view, the inescapable future for all nations, whether capitalist (by which he means the present corporate state) or socialist, is one of catastrophic environmental collapse. The present Western system of expanding industrial production and rising living standards simply cannot be sustained. And there is little or no prospect of the State, in the West or the East, taking the necessary measures to prevent the impending disaster. The end of the world is nigh. For in Heilbroner's view it is the very system of industrial production itself, of industrial-technological civilization and its scientific ethos, which must be abolished if we are to save human life on this planet:

"In place of the long-established encouragement of industrial production must come its careful restriction and long-term diminution within society. In place of prodigalities of consumption must come new frugal attitudes."

"... the long-term solution requires nothing less than the gradual abandonment of the lethal techniques, the uncongenial ways of life, and the dangerous mentality of industrial civilization itself."⁴

For Heilbroner, then, only a new form of "post-industrial" — actually *non-industrial* — society can preserve human life. However, he is no less pessimistic about the chances of attaining such a society. In the 'capitalist' and socialist blocs alike, few people seem ready to give up the "prevailing canons of self-concern", the "calculus of selfishness parading as reason", and the "more agreeable aspects of our self-indulgent culture".⁵

Could there be a more eloquent confession than this of the bankruptcy of modern liberalism, of its despair at the possibility of maintaining (let alone extending) a civilization which provides plenty and prosperity for its people? But just as, if not more, significant, is Heilbroner's equally candid abandonment of the hopes and ideals of *liberty*. For if mankind *is* to survive in a "post-industrial" society, Heilbroner states, then that survival will probably depend upon "hierarchies of power and strongly felt bonds of peoplehood, to the discomfort of those who would hope that the challenges of the human prospect would fully banish the thralldom of authority and ideology and foster the 'liberation' of the individual".⁶ The nature of this "post-industrial" society Heilbroner envisions as humanity's one hope is thus only too clear: it is nothing less than a complete reversion to the tribal stagnation and tyranny under which mankind had spent most of its existence prior to the intellectual and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth century. It would constitute a reversion to the poverty, backbreaking manual labour, the squalor, disease, misery and death which characterized the pre-capitalist millennia.

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Director: Dr Chris R. Tame
Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



A Hatred For Life

Having despaired of liberalism's ability to maintain a free and prosperous society it is perhaps hardly surprising to find Heilbroner disparaging even the very *desire* for material goods and prosperity. Technological-industrial-capitalist civilization is, we are informed in a suitably disapproving tone, "obsessed with material achievement, attuned to highly quantitative modes of thought".⁷ The experience of this crassly materialistic society with its unparalleled abundance and mastery over nature has proven, in Heilbroner's view, "the philosopher's warnings of the ultimate inadequacy of material possessions ... the inability of a civilization directed to material improvement to satisfy the human spirit".⁸ More specifically, we are informed that the "styles of life" of industrialism and capitalism are, in contrast with non-industrial societies, "dazzlingly rich in every dimension except that of the cultivation of the human person" and of "the aesthetic aspects of life".⁹ Needless to say industrial capitalism is particularly un-natural and unsuited to the requirements of human nature:

"... whatever its economic strengths, the social ethos of capitalism is ultimately unsatisfactory for the individual and unstable for the community. The stress on personal achievement, the acquisitive drive that is touted as the Good Life — all this may be, in the end, the critical weakness of capitalist society, although providing much of the motor force of its economy."¹⁰

But it is not simply capitalist industrialism at fault, in Heilbroner's view, but *industrial production per se!* Our "civilizational malaise" is, he states, shared by capitalist and socialist nations alike and is "a malady ultimately rooted in the imperative of a common mode of production".¹¹ Industrialism itself is, we are told, "peculiarly demanding" and "dehumanizing", placing grievous "constraints" upon us — largely because, it seems, "(t)he rhythms of industrial production are not those of nature".¹²

The ceaseless toil, poverty and suffering of the pre-industrial societies — is this then really what we are supposed to find more distinctively and naturally "human", more satisfying to the "human spirit" than our own? Apparently so, for Heilbroner draws quite unconcealed inspiration from humanity's stagnant pre-industrial and tribal existence, from

"our knowledge that some human societies have existed for millenia, and that others can probably exist for future millenia, in a continuous rhythm of birth and coming of age and death, without pressing toward those dangerous ecological limits, or engendering those dangerous social tensions, that threaten present day 'advanced' societies. In our discovery of 'primitive' cultures, living out their timeless histories, we may have found the single most important object lesson for future man."¹³

Is he serious? Can any supposedly sane individual really mean what Heilbroner appears to be saying? What "cultivation of the human person" was really inherent in pre-industrial societies, societies which were characterized by coercive political and social hierarchies and in which humanity was shackled not only by the *material* chains of poverty and toil, of slavery, serfdom, feudal lordship, absolute monarchies and the like, but by the even more severe *mental* chains of religion, superstition, and tribal 'taboos', of unquestioning fear and acquiescence before age-old repressive and anti-human social mores? If Heilbroner finds such societies "dazzlingly" and "aesthetically" rich and appealing then one can only say that he has a curious — and sadistic — set of aesthetic tastes.

But, of course, Heilbroner's claims are absolute nonsense. It is not in pre-industrial societies but in capitalist industrialism that the "cultivation of the human person" becomes really possible, in which those mental and physical shackles have been increasingly dissolved and the masses able to enjoy lives of increased freedom, dignity, prosperity and leisure.¹⁴ And, ironically, it has only been such a 'materialistic' industrial society which has liberated the individual from the most basic 'materialistic' concern, that of simple survival, of getting enough to eat, which so constantly presses upon the people of non-industrial societies. A rich and amazing variety of choice is the characteristic of industrial capitalism - including the option of 'dropping out' and forming non-industrial, 'non-materialistic' communes by those who so desire. Not surprisingly, Heilbroner neglects to inform us why, if capitalist industrialism *is* so profoundly unsatisfying and alien to the "human spirit" so few *do* actually 'drop out'. It is a strange phenomenon, given Heilbroner's reasoning, to find so few — with the notable exceptions of prosperous members of the intellectual establishment and the spoiled offspring of the upper classes — sharing his primitivistic and puritanical rejection of affluence and 'materialism'. Curious indeed to find the world's population so avidly and "selfishly" striving to maintain, enhance or simply *acquire* that way of life!

The Revolt Against Freedom

However, the most charitable interpretation of Heilbroner's position, that he is simply abysmally *stupid*, must be ruled out. Something far more sinister, more *pathological*, is involved. For we do, in fact, find Heilbroner openly admitting that industrial-technological civilization has given man "literally superhuman ability to control the physical and chemical attributes of nature",¹⁵ that it has "enabled him to work miracles" and freed him from "his animal bondage".¹⁶ The inescapable conclusion is that for Heilbroner such pre-industrial "animal bondage" really is less of a "malaise", less spiritually constraining, than capitalist industrialism and its "miracles" of affluence, health, and freedom! Is it not clear that once more we are in the presence of that pathological revolt against freedom and individuality which can be found in the writings of so many (though not all) socialists and analysts of 'alienation'?

In fact, Heilbroner gives himself away when he lists the "stress on personal achievement" as one of the reasons for capitalist industrialism's allegedly spiritually uncongenial nature. For here we have the real essence of his frank admiration for pre-industrial and primitive societies, and its psychological cause — the desire to escape the burdens of individual effort, freedom and self-responsibility and to be absorbed in the womb-like security of the 'organic' society. It is this pathological motivation which Sir Karl Popper has so penetratingly delineated as a major factor in human history and in the totalitarian revolt against the 'open society'. In Popper's words, it is "the strain of our civilization and its demand for personal responsibility ... the strain created by the effort which life in an open and partially abstract society continually demands from us - by the endeavour to be rational ... to look after ourselves, and to accept responsibilities".¹⁷ Let us harbour no illusions regarding Heilbroner's motivation or the real character of his "post-industrial" social goal as the *total* abolition of human freedom and a reversion in *every* respect to primitive and despotic tribalism. He is not, as the more charitable or innocent might imagine, simply envisaging some idyllic and arcadian utopia which, while unsullied by

industry and commerce, allows man to exist on some higher plane of intellectual and spiritual freedom. No, Heilbroner can leave us in no doubt in this respect. He makes it unmistakably clear that the scientific ethos, the questioning and critical intelligence, with its “Promethean spirit” and “intellectual daring”, will have little or no place in the society he visualizes and welcomes. As he frankly declares, such a “post-industrial” society will probably

“turn in the direction of many pre-industrial societies — toward the exploration of inner states of experience rather than the outer world of fact and material accomplishment. Tradition and ritual, the pillars of life in virtually all societies other than those of an industrial character, would probably once again assert their ancient claims as the guide to and solace for life. The struggle for individual achievement, especially for material ends, is likely to give way to the acceptance of communally organized and ordained roles.”¹⁸

And so we can see, all his rhetoric about the “dazzling richness”, the “aesthetic aspects” and the “cultivation of the human person” is revealed as nothing but the nonsensical verbiage, the intellectual camouflage, it really is. Not merely the reversion to the material poverty and stagnation of pre-industrial societies, but a reversion to their intellectual poverty, their taboo and superstition ridden mentality — this is what Heilbroner willingly accepts. Here is the naked and ugly truth behind his manifestly absurd and blatantly illogical tirade against industrial capitalism and this is the price he is quite willing to pay in order to ‘liberate’ men from the burdens of freedom and self-responsibility (“the struggle for individual achievement”) — the loss of all moral, social and intellectual autonomy in a structure of “traditional and ritual” and “communally organized and ordained roles”. So much for the “cultivation of the human person”.

Some Revealing Doubts

In all fairness to Heilbroner, it should be conceded that he does appear to have some slight second thoughts about his “post-industrial” vision. At one point he even admits, albeit most reluctantly and hurriedly, that pre-industrial societies were not quite completely a heavenly paradise and did possess some “levels of ignorance and cruel anxiety”.¹⁹ He does seem to nurse a slight nostalgic regret at the prospect of the loss of “the heritage of our personal liberties, our atomistic existences”, remarking that “(to) a very great degree, the public must take precedence over the private — an aim to which it is easy to give lip service in the abstract, but difficult for someone used to the pleasures of political, social, and intellectual freedom to accept in fact”.²⁰ As a prosperous and prestigious member of the ‘liberal’ intellectual establishment, Heilbroner doubtless has a more of the goods of our vulgar, materialistic society to lose than most of us — not forgetting the ‘freedom’ that such ‘liberals’ have for so long enjoyed in ‘socially engineering’ and regulating the lives of other people. But Heilbroner should not worry overmuch, for he and his type will surely find a similarly secure and rewarding place in the ruling class of the “post-industrial” society they seek, creating and administering its “tradition and ritual” and “ordaining” the “roles” of its inmates (all in the “public” interest, of course). An unfair assertion? I think not. When I see Heilbroner, Galbraith and all the other affluent upper-class ‘liberal’ critics of ‘vulgar materialism’ renouncing their luxurious life styles and ample stores of worldly goods to adopt lives of poverty and primitive simplicity, only then will

I cease suspecting the of rank hypocrisy, (though not of a vicious lust for power and a pathological fear of freedom).

The Two Heilbroners

The full irony of Heilbroner’s abandonment of reason and human happiness is all the more striking if we contrast *The Human Prospect* with his earlier writings. In his 1962 essay “The Future of Capitalism”²¹ Heilbroner attempted to predict the demise of capitalism as a social order, just as feudalism had perished before it. In the course of this exercise he presented a panegyric to science as “a majestic driving force from which to draw social energy and inspiration”.²² Ridiculously trying to deny any connection between capitalism and the rise of scientific inquiry and technological progress, Heilbroner argued that while feudalism was destroyed from within by the rise of the ‘cash nexus’ and market relationships, so capitalism will be destroyed by the rise of scientific inquiry, and scientific and technological social relationships within it. A planned society — a “society of organization” as he puts it²³ — will thus result from “the primacy of scientific discovery”.²⁴ It will be a society of “rational solutions to social problems”, a “purposively constituted and consciously directed social system”.²⁵ Capitalism is, in contrast, excoriated for its alleged “absence of meaning and intelligence” and lack of “purposeful thought and action”.²⁶ Heilbroner’s predicted — and idealised — society at that time represented a glorious vision of progress and science, one whose “essential idea” is “to impose human will on the social universe”.²⁷ The contrast, then, between the Heilbroner of the Sixties and the Heilbroner of the Seventies, underlines the collapse of modern liberalism’s pretence of being a progressive, liberating creed. From a liberation of humanity from the alleged poverty and helplessness of capitalism, Heilbroner accepts a degree of poverty and passivity which even he recognises is greater than anything he claims held sway under capitalism. In fact, even in the earlier Heilbroner the grimly totalitarian nature of his ideal “society of organization” was impossible to conceal. He admitted that “not alone economic affairs (which should become of secondary importance), but the numbers and location of the population and its genetic quality, the manner of social domestication of children, the choice of life-work — even the very duration of life itself — are all apt to become subjects for scientific investigation and direction”.²⁸ Nevertheless, the early Heilbroner at least attempted to disguise such tyranny as a form of progress, science and liberation. The later Heilbroner disposes of such camouflage. The early Heilbroner even admitted, albeit briefly, that there might be a “dangerous collectivist tinge”²⁹ to his envisioned utopia of social control. The later Heilbroner frankly accepts primitive collectivism in all its grim horror as the only future for humanity.

Liberalism, True and False

And there we have it. Having despaired of successfully maintaining the industrial civilization it inherited from the *real* (that is, ‘classical’) liberalism, modern ‘liberalism’ is reduced to attacking affluence and abundance and lauding the poverty and superstition of primitive tribalism as not merely the only hope for human survival but as a higher and a more spiritually satisfying ideal! Whatever its errors and confusions statist ‘liberalism’ in its heyday at least generally wore the garb of rationality, modernity and progress. The ‘social engineers’, socialists, progressives, fabians, technocrats and their fellows at least *promised* a future of prosperity, progress and even, as they saw it, freedom for all. But now the game is up, and Heilbroner has blown the whistle on it. Unable to

'deliver the goods' the 'liberal' intellectual has cast off the mantle of modernity. And what is revealed is nothing less than the figure of the evil, reactionary conservatism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For it was the conservative philosophers like Bonald, De Maistre, Chateaubriand and their sociological disciples who launched the intellectual counter-revolution against the capitalism, industrialism and individualism which were destroying their beloved 'organic society'. Their conception of man was likewise as a creature for whom individual liberty and personal achievement were horrific burdens. For them, just as for Heilbroner, affluence and abundance were rejected as vulgar and materialistic and spiritually uncongenial,³⁰ and a society dominated by 'inner' consciousness, rather than science and reason, and by "communally organized and ordained roles", was declared to be the fitting, satisfying, and natural environment for man.³¹ And so, as we can see, modern 'liberalism' has given up even the pretence of having anything to do with liberty and liberation — with real liberalism! It emerges as a frankly repressive and anti-human conservatism, joining that 'perennial philosophy', the pathological 'anti-life' tradition of disparagement of the material world and the fear of freedom and individual effort.

The anti-individualism and anti-materialism of Heilbroner and his ilk finds a welcome audience amongst certain groups, namely, the intellectuals and politicians who seek a justification for their lust for power over their fellows, and the guilt-stricken and indoctrinated progeny of so many of the 'upper classes'. But the bulk of the world's population continues to demonstrate its preference for freedom and material wealth - or, at least, attempts to do so in the face of states and collectivist movements which strive to impose their own deluded visions upon the world. The statist 'liberalism' of Heilbroner has nothing to offer the great mass of the world's people. Real liberalism — the free market, individualism, rationalism, science and materialism — has everything to offer.

In Heilbroner's "The Human Prospect" modern liberalism has supplied its own obituary. The new liberalism is dead, but the real liberalism lives on.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. "The Human Prospect", *The New York Review of Books*, Jan. 24, 1974. *An Inquiry Into The Human Prospect* (Norton, NY, 1974). All subsequent quotations from Heilbroner are taken from the earlier, *New York Review*, essay.
2. Although Heilbroner is not, of course, representative of other, more Marxist oriented and 'revolutionary', segments of the 'Left'.
3. See Edwin G. Dolan, "Capitalism and the Environment", *The Individualist*, Vol. 3, No. 3, March 1971 and *TANSTAAFL: The Economic Strategy for the Environmental Crisis* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, NY, 1971); *Idem*, "Environmental Policy and Property Rights", in S. L. Blumenfeld, ed., *Property in a Humane Economy*, Open Court, La Salle, Illinois, 1974; Murray N. Rothbard, "The Great Ecology Issue: Conservation in the Free Market", *The Individualist*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Feb. 1970, and Chapter 12, "Conservation, Ecology and Growth", in Rothbard, *For A New Liberty* (Macmillan, NY, 1973); Robert Poole, Jr., "Reason and Ecology", in D. James, ed., *Outside Looking In* (Harper and Row, NY, 1972); John Maddox, *The Doomsday Syndrome: An Assault on Pessimism* (Macmillan, London, 1972) and *Beyond The Energy Crisis* (Hutchinson, London, 1975); Wilfred Beckerman *In Defence of Economic Growth* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1974) and *Pricing For Pollution* (Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 1975); M. R. Copulos, ed., *Energy Perspectives* (Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., 1978); Victor Hicken *The World Is Coming To An End: An Irreverent Look at Modern Domsayers* (Arlington House, New Rochelle, NY, 1975); David Friedman *Laissez Faire In Population: The Least Bad Solution* (The Population Council, NY, 1972); M. J. Grayson & T. R. Shepard, Jr., *The Disaster Lobby* (Arlington House NY 1972); Petr Beckmann *Ecohystrics and*

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4. Heilbroner, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
5. *Ibid*, p. 31.
6. *Ibid*, p. 31.
7. *Ibid*, p. 27.
8. *Ibid*, p. 22.
9. *Ibid*, p. 27.
10. *Ibid*, p. 26.
11. *Ibid*, p. 27.
12. *Ibid*, p. 27.
13. *Ibid*, p. 34.
14. It is a vivid illustration of the deterioration of rational thought since the era of classical liberalism to compare Heilbroner's romantic primitivism with the analysis undertaken by one of those original liberals, John Millar, in his *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (3rd ed., 1779). Contrary to Heilbroner, Millar argued that it was precisely upon the evolution of industry and commerce, upon the division of labour and the free market, that the development of any real freedom, dignity and refinement, any real "cultivation of the human person", was dependent. "Where-ever men of inferior condition are enabled to live in affluence by their own industry, and, in procuring their livelihood, have little occasion to court the favour of their superiors, there we may expect that ideas of liberty will be universally diffused. *This happy arrangement of things, is naturally produced by commerce and manufactures, but it would be ... vain to look for it in the uncultivated parts of the world ...*" (p. 295. My emphasis.) The *Ranks* is reprinted in whole in William C. Lehmann's biography and analysis of Millar, *John Millar of Glasgow 1735-1801: His Life and Thought and Contributions to Sociological Analysis* (Cambridge University Press, 1960).
15. Heilbroner, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
16. *Ibid*, p. 34.
17. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: Vol. I, The Spell of Plato* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1966 rev. ed.), pp. 5 & 176. And, of course, also see Nathaniel Branden's brilliant and seminal analysis in his essay "Alienation", in Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New American Library, NY, 1967)
18. Heilbroner, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
19. *Ibid*, p. 34.
20. *Ibid*, p. 34.
21. *Commentary*, April, 1966; reprinted in D. H. Wrong and H. L. Gracey, eds, *Readings in Introductory Sociology*, 2nd ed., Macmillan, NY 1972 from which the subsequent quotations refer.
22. *Ibid*, p. 510.
23. *Ibid*, p. 506, (italics his).
24. *Ibid*, p. 509.
25. *Ibid*, p. 509.
26. *Ibid*, p. 510.
27. *Ibid*, p. 510.
28. *Ibid*, p. 509.
29. *Ibid*, p. 510.
30. It should be noted in passing that the earlier Heilbroner of 'The Future of Capitalism', was also able to make that strange, but typically socialist, combination of both blaming capitalism for not providing high enough living standards, and sufficient material goods, while at the same time adopting tones of ascetic condescension at capitalism's alleged obsession with materialism, its "surrender to the acquisitive impulse" (*op. cit.* p. 504). Thus capitalism is indicted for its "absence of any transcendental secular goal", its "oppressive limitation to thought and spirit" (p. 501). Self-interest, Heilbroner claimed, has never been able to stimulate much enthusiasm as a virtue, or as a "powerful (avatar) of the social imagination" (p. 508). In contrast, he claimed, science carried with it a "near religious ethos of conviction and even sacrifice" (p.509). This ability of most varieties of anti-libertarianism to combine a critique of acquisitiveness and egoism, with a condemnation of a social system for not providing sufficient opportunity for acquisition and personal fulfilment is extremely odd and in urgent need of a detailed analysis.
31. See Robert A. Nisbet, "Conservatism and Sociology", *American Journal of Sociology*, Sept. 1952; "De Bonald and the Concept of the Social Group", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, June 1944; "The French Revolution and the Rise of Sociology", *American Journal of Sociology*, Sept. 1943; *The Sociological Tradition* (Heinemann, London, 1970). And also see Leon Bramson, *The Political Context of Sociology* (Princeton University Press, 1961) and Albert Salomon *The Tyranny of Progress: Reflections on the Origins of Sociology* (Noonday Press, NY, 1946).