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**THE FUTURE OF FREE AND DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS:
A CRITIQUE OF ROBERT L. HEILBRONER'S
*AN INQUIRY INTO THE HUMAN PROSPECT***

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In his recent book, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect*, Robert L. Heilbroner argues that the current use of scientific technology by the industrialized nations is so rapidly exhausting the world's resources that free and democratic institutions must give way to authoritarian regimes with the power to control economic production, population size, and the expression of ideas, or mankind will perish. While acknowledging the seriousness of the problems noted by Heilbroner, I contend that free and democratic institutions can, and probably will, provide solutions. To support this contention, I note that Heilbroner's pessimism about our institutions is based upon a conception of human nature akin to that held by Thomas Hobbes. Like Hobbes, Heilbroner believes that human nature is such that authoritarian solutions are necessary, especially when men face problems of scarcity. By arguing that such a view of human nature is false, the grounds for Heilbroner's pessimism with respect to the future of free and democratic institutions is removed.

† † †

Heilbroner (1974) has touched upon problems and fears which many of us have felt but not verbalized. So successfully has he stated some of the central issues which must concern anyone who cares about the future of mankind and his institutions that his book has achieved a quite unexpected popularity, selling 80,000 copies within a few months of its publication.

What does Heilbroner tell us which provokes such widespread interest? Without wishful thinking, he calls attention in Chapter Two to three problems with a high potential for human tragedy.

First, there is the continued growth of the world's population—a growth which realistically may be expected to continue at an alarming pace, despite well-intentioned but largely impractical efforts to introduce effective birth-control programs.

Second, the prospects are excellent that nation-states will continue to seek a solution of their conflicts with one another through war. According to Heilbroner, such wars may be limited to two or more nations engaged in a relatively local conflict. For example, few of us would be surprised to learn over the next fifty years that war between Israel and her Arab neighbors occurred periodically. We would not be surprised at similar news about the Greeks and Turks on Cyprus or about the peoples of North and South Vietnam. Given the

deeply-entrenched attitudes of hostility between peoples living near to one another throughout the world, the list of limited wars which are likely to occur is a discouragingly long one. Even worse, there is a considerable probability that we shall have major wars exceeding the destructiveness of anything mankind has yet witnessed. It is almost certain that nuclear weapons will be possessed within a few years not only by the major powers but also by some of the important under-developed nations. During the period when only the major powers have nuclear weapons, there is sufficient cause for pessimism when one considers the possibilities of conflict present in the varying relationships among Russia, China, and the United States. When the under-developed nations have nuclear weaponry, however, Heilbroner observes that for the first time we may experience "wars of redistribution" in which the poor nations attack the rich in an effort to gain a larger share of the world's wealth (1974:43).

While the two problems of population growth and war are sufficient to make the human prospect gloomy, there is yet a third danger which promises to be even more important in shaping the future of mankind. This danger arises from the fact that the current use of scientific technology by the industrialized nations is so rapidly exhausting the world's resources that man's ability to survive will be in jeopardy. The problem here has many aspects. We are using up the materials needed to produce goods; we are exhausting our energy resources; and we are polluting the means of sustaining life: our land, our water, and our air. To take but one illustration, Heilbroner cites figures to show that if we continue the present pace of heat-producing activities, we shall so increase the earth's temperature within 250 years that the earth will no longer be suitable for human habitation (1974:51).

Happily, Heilbroner does not predict that the history of mankind has its end in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, he does conclude that the "threats of runaway populations, oblitative war, and potential environmental collapse, can be seen as an extended and growing crisis induced by the advent of a command over natural processes and forces that far exceeds the reach of our present mechanisms of social control" (1974:57).

Heilbroner then turns to the question of whether our

present socio-economic systems have the adaptive capacity to meet the crises so clearly coming upon us. He observes that there are two major socio-economic systems which influence human behavior in our time: capitalism and socialism (1974: 63). Discussing capitalism first, Heilbroner notes that the demands of survival require that economic growth cease or be drastically reduced. When fewer material goods become available, capitalist societies will experience internal crises as their members struggle with one another for what they regard as their proper share of the goods available. According to Heilbroner:

The struggle for relative position would not only pit one class against another, but also each against all, as lower and middle groups engaged in a free-for-all for higher incomes. This would bring enormous inflationary pressures of the kind that capitalism is already beginning to experience, and would require the imposition of much stronger control measures than any that capitalism has yet succeeded in introducing—indeed, than any that capitalist governments have yet imagined.

In bluntest terms, the question is whether the Hobbesian struggle that is likely to arise in such a strait-jacketed economic society would not impose intolerable strains on the representative democratic political apparatus that has been historically associated with capitalist societies. (1974:88-89).

On the next page, Heilbroner then answers his own blunt question by saying that most capitalist nations will find that the task exceeds the capabilities of representative democracy. In similar fashion, he tells us that democratically-governed, socialist nations will face the same kind of internal crisis and will also be forced to authoritarian political systems (1974: 92). As a further consequence of the move to authoritarian regimes, Heilbroner envisions a time when our present freedoms of expression shall give way to a demand from our leaders for a quasi-military devotion and sacrifice which brooks no disagreement with the official line (1974:26, 110).

In sum, the human prospect for Heilbroner is one in which mankind will survive at a considerably lower standard of living than is now enjoyed by most persons in the advanced industrial nations. To achieve that survival, free and democratic institutions will give way to authoritarian political systems with the power to control economic activity, population size, and the expression of ideas.

If we reflect now upon this prospect, can anything be said to alleviate the bleakness? We can dream that our scientists will be so inventive in the next 100 years that ways will be found of increasing economic productivity, of feeding a continuously expanding population, and of ceasing to pollute the environment. But we must admit that we should only

be dreaming. At present, there are no realistic possibilities of the coming of a scientific Savior. Accordingly, I think we must agree with Heilbroner that we face a declining standard of living and a greater measure of social control with respect to economic production and population size.

At the same time, I cannot agree that the type of social control required involves the loss of the free and democratic institutions we now possess. Let us return to that portion of Heilbroner's argument where he foresees the demise of representative democracy and examine it again. He tells us that when goods become more scarce, we shall have a struggle of "one class against another" and "each against all" (1974: 89). Such a struggle will impose an intolerable strain on representative democracy and will be brought to an end only when authoritarian institutions come into being with sufficient power to enforce whatever decrees are necessary.

Heilbroner's reasoning is strikingly reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes' famous description of the natural condition of mankind in Chapter 13 of the *Leviathan* (originally published in 1651). There, Hobbes says: ". . . during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man" (1929:96). Moreover, in such condition, one finds "the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" (1929:97). Hobbes goes on to argue that if rational men were in such a state of nature, they would recognize that the only way to establish the common power needed for security is for each person to give up his right of governing himself to an absolute Sovereign (1929:131-132)—a Sovereign empowered, among other things, to censor the expression of any opinion endangering the peace of the commonwealth (1929:136-137). If one then asks why Hobbes believed such a complete surrender of self-governance to be necessary, he finds the answer in Hobbes' conception of human nature. For Hobbes, men will by nature quarrel with one another unless they have such a common power "to keep them all in awe" (1929:96).

Fortunately, we have ample evidence from history to know that Hobbes was wrong. Men can, and have, lived peacefully with one another without the complete surrender of those rights thought necessary by him. We also have ample evidence from psychology and the social sciences to know that Hobbes was wrong. Men are, in large part, the products of their social upbringing. On the one hand, if a society teaches its members to quarrel and to reach for their guns when it is time to divide the economic assets, they will do so. Then, peace can be restored only by a power sufficiently immense to keep them all in awe. On the other hand, if a society teaches its members to press their economic demands by the use of democratic procedures and to accept the lawful policies thereby enacted, there may be strain, frustration, riots, but it is not likely that there will be revolution.

So far as I can see, Heilbroner's pessimism with respect

to the future of free and democratic institutions assumes an estimate of human motivation akin to that held by Hobbes. Moreover, just as the testimony of history and of the sciences has already refuted the Hobbesian view, so also does this same evidence provide good reason for thinking that people, trained by long habit in the use of free and democratic institutions, will meet the economic crises to come. This being so, there is more hope in the human prospect than Heilbroner would lead us to believe.

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