

A New Economic Order or Human Extinction

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The clamour of the Third World for a New International Economic Order has so far produced little concrete benefit, and judging from the despatches from Manila, the Fifth UNCTAD Meeting in Manila in May will not yield tangible dividends either. But a New International Economic Order is being framed for the human community chiefly at Nature's instance. It is still a far-off cloud on the horizon and its configuration is yet realised chiefly as prophetic speculations by sensitive western thinkers like Paul Ehrlich, Geoffrey Barraclough and Robert Heilbroner, who are dubbed the Writers of the Apocalypse because they foresee the end of the present industrial society.

These speculations should concern Third World countries, the majority of which are currently emulating western models of development, because it appears that the model will soon be declared obsolete. But what is exciting is that those speculations, if properly analysed, might offer the outlines of a New International Economic Order which will virtually reverse the roles of the 'developed' and the 'underdeveloped'.

In his *'An Inquiry into the Human Prospect'* a provocative treatise which even his critics find free of the over-simplifications that mar much of similar writing, Heilbroner declares that 'the values of an industrial civilisation, which has for two centuries given us not only material advance but also a sense of plan and purpose, now seem to be losing their self-evident justification'. Besides such disturbing social manifestations as the rejection of materialistic values by the educated youth in these countries whose protest has taken the form of drug addiction and hippie style withdrawal, there is the growing awareness that it will not be possible to sustain the trend of economic growth for very much longer.

This is a serious predicament because the concept of unlimited

growth is the key pivot of western industrial systems both, capitalist and socialist. It is depended on to ensure better and better standards of living for high consumption societies, defuse the tensions between the North and the South over the unequal distribution of international wealth and keep the developed countries ahead of the poorer ones in the economic race.

Two significant events triggered off the new thinking. The Arab oil embargo forced the industrialised countries to recognise their extreme vulnerability in respect of energy and, by extension, raw materials. The other perhaps more fundamental reason followed from the findings of the Club of Rome ecologists which were published under the title *'Limits to Growth'* in 1974. These represent some of the most far-reaching insights achieved in the 20th century and demonstrate that the parameters of exponential growth are ultimately regulated not by Techno-Scientific Man as he had so arrogantly assumed during the last two centuries, but by all-embracing Nature.

They compelled Man to recognise that he is also dependent on the 4 great biological systems — fisheries, forests, grasslands and croplands — for both food and raw materials; that there is a definite limit to 'human management' and 'human interference' and furthermore that the activities of Industrial Man have in many areas impinged dangerously on the natural limits so that the danger signals are already on.

Extrapolating from environmental, social and cultural sources, Heilbroner sums as follows:

"Under any and all assumptions one irrefutable conclusion remains. The industrial growth process, so central to the economic and social life of capitalism and western socialism alike will be forced to slow down, in all likelihood within a generation or two and will have to give way to decline thereafter".

One of Heilbroner's best insights is that the future will be shaped not by economic rationalisations but the human capabilities for political change among various groups. Concepts like World Government might be theoretically desirable but fundamental human traits militate against their acceptance. National identification is the extension of a deep-lying human need for a child to identify with its family during the early years of its life. Although the capacity to empathise widens, there is in every known culture a limit beyond which this impulse to identify is blocked, and this demarcates those within a society from those beyond it. In this way nation-states, often with the most heterogeneous populations serve as psychologically valid surrogates of the family in childhood.

The other important "political aspect of human nature" is the trait of obedience which is easy to locate in the first years of experience and is expressed in adult behaviour as the normal willing acquiescence of men in the exercise of political authority. Heilbroner concludes with great reluctance that the implication of this recognition is:

"that the passage through the gauntlet may be possible only under governments capable of rallying obedience far more effectively than would be possible in a democratic setting".

Making the vital futurological projections Heilbroner says:

"The human prospect is not an irreversible death sentence. It is not apocalypse or doomsday toward which we are headed, although the risk of enormous catastrophes exists. The prospect is better viewed as a formidable array of challenges that must be overcome before human survival is assured and that can be overcome by the saving intervention of nature, if not by the wisdom and foresight of man. The death sentence is therefore better viewed as a contingent life sentence—one that will permit the continuance of human society, but only on a basis very different from that of the present, and probably only after much suffering during the period of transition.

"What sort of society might eventually emerge? I believe 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 civilisation itself. A few elements of the post-industrial society can be discerned.

"The societal view of production and consumption must stress the parsimonious, not the prodigal, attitudes. The resource consuming and heat-generating process must be regarded as necessary evils, not as social triumphs, to be relegated to as small a portion of economic life as possible. This implies a sweeping reorganisation of the mode of production in ways that cannot be foretold, but that would seem to imply the end of the giant factory, the huge office, perhaps of the urban complex.

"It is therefore possible that a post-industrial society would also 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 non-industrial societies, would probably once again assert their ancient claims as the guide to and solace for life. It is likely that the ethos of "Science" so intimately linked with industrial application would play a much reduced role and that the post-industrial society would witness the waning of much of the "work ethic" that is intimately entwined with our industrial society".

The future is not totally predictable but there are many signs such as the recession that the world economy has not been able to shake off for the past several years and the oil troubles caused by the establishment of an anti-western regime in Iran that indicate that these speculations provide at least one set of distinct possibilities.

Third World strategies for future action are being framed without taking these projections into consideration at all as though continuing economic expansion is one of the eternal verities. This time-lag in ideas has been a serious Third World weakness that has confounded most of our development efforts. What is of fundamental importance here is that the post-industrial societies envisaged by Heilbroner incorporate the main features of traditional societies in the Third World — economical resource extraction and consumption which is linked with their basically non-acquisitive character, and stress on the exploration of inner states of experience rather than the acqui-

sition of material wealth and power. The implication is that the progressive or developed societies of the future will have the characteristics of the present 'underdeveloped' societies.

Should we or should we not incorporate these possibilities when we frame our strategies for the coming decade? We shall have to make our own reassessments of concepts such as 'growth' and 'resource consumption' and realise that parsimonious resource-use within our societies at present covered by terms such as 'underdevelopment' have great survival value and that consumerism and rising material aspirations are dangerous values to encourage in our populations.

In the international field it has been admitted by the advanced countries that their motive for encouraging growth in the developing countries is that we may further serve as markets for manufactured products. But industrial growth in the Third World is indirectly blocked by protectionist policies. If we persevere with growth strategies in spite of the danger signals that are now clearly showing we shall share, or more probably take the brunt of the collapse when it comes especially because weapons threats may be used to pressurise us into impossible loan repayments. If we adopt 'export-led Growth strategies' we will only be making our raw materials available for growth in the industrialised countries till our resources are also consumed.

The global market is the mechanism that makes the 'Present Economic Order' possible and it is the instrument that perpetuates industrial growth which is bringing humanity close to the brink of disaster. We cannot compel the industrialised countries, either capitalist or socialist, to make concessions but we can make a concerted move to consider withdrawing ourselves from the global market because our societies are still largely pre-industrial and can survive the wrench. This is perhaps one way in which we might assist nature to achieve a New International Economic Order and also ensure the continuance of human civilisation.