

# Reflections on the New Pessimism

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About thirty years ago behavioral scientists introduced the idea of a "zero-sum" game. Poker, chess, and football—these were "zero-sum" games. Winning the game implied that someone else lost; an advantage for one party was necessarily a disadvantage for another. At that time the "zero-sum" analogy was not applied to societies as a whole. If the middle class increased its wealth, this did not imply that the resources of the lower class were decreased. The success of Western industrial societies did not necessarily imply the poverty of underdeveloped countries. The total wealth of the planet could expand; the extension of rights to blacks and other minorities did not necessarily undermine the position of the majority. These were the guiding assumptions of liberals in the sixties.

But today these assumptions are under attack. The metaphor of the "zero-sum" game is now thought to describe societies as a whole. The assumptions of natural scarcity have replaced the assumptions of increasing abundance. The era of rapid growth, it is thought, has ended. In domestic affairs we no longer believe that poverty can be abolished by the creation of avenues of social mobility. And we are coming increasingly to believe that the poverty of much of the Third World has a direct and even causal relationship with the wealth of the West. They are poor *because we are rich*.

There is more to this change than our latest recession. Material scarcity leads in strange ways to psychic scarcity. The "avant garde" ethic of the 1960's—openness, spontaneity, honesty—has been replaced with attitudes that stress sophistication, detachment, and emotional reserve. The new television stars—Kojak, Columbo—are detectives who look more and more like the heroes of the thirties and forties—Philip Marlowe and Nick Charles—worldly wise, resigned to the inevitability of evil, corruption, and human greed. The innocence, simplicity, and moral idealism of "Bonanza" has disappeared from the screen.

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Today's students, we are told, no longer dream of remaking the world. They are interested in grades, in specific useful knowledge. Not the free play of ideas, but vocationalism and hard-headed practicality are the order of the day. In one sense this is an adaptation to a world where jobs *are* scarce and may remain so for some time. But the new scarcity assumptions also reflect a broader loss of faith in the future: a pessimism about the beneficent effects of technology, pessimism about the future of poverty and urban squalor, in sum, a disbelief that human problems can be solved by human beings.

The new pessimism of the seventies rewrites the history of the sixties. The sixties are now seen as a decade of failure—of failure to provide fundamental changes in the position of minorities in the society, to reduce urban poverty and crime, and most significantly, of failure of experiments in democratic government and economic development in much of the Third World. The liberal solutions were tried and found wanting. Even the material progress of the sixties is discounted. Of the hundred students in my sociology class, over eighty feel that the standard of living of America in the past twenty years had increased less than 25 per cent! (An increase of well over 100 per cent would be more accurate.)

In part, one welcomes the new pessimism. Movements like the War on Poverty and the export of democracy and capitalism to poor countries relied upon a conception of human societies that was simplistic in the extreme. These movements rejected the "zero-sum" game metaphor as inappropriate. Poverty, it was thought, could be abolished without taxing the wealthy and giving to the poor. It could be abolished by providing opportunity. The development of the Third World could be fostered without wholesale transformation of traditional social structures and was in no way impeded by these societies' continuing dependence on the export of cheap raw materials to the West. To the extent that it allows us to see the self-deceiving quality of such ideas, the new scarcity assumptions are welcome.

But the new pessimism takes us beyond a reassessment of the unrealistic expectations of the sixties. The new conventional wisdom—and the growing influence

of writers like Robert Heilbroner, Geoffrey Barraclough, and Paul Ehrlich—suggests a world of permanent scarcity, a planetary “zero-sum” game, in which the recent winners (the industrialized West) not only should not, but cannot, long maintain their position. The age of Western affluence is coming to an end.

I want to attack these prophecies of doom on two grounds. *First*, I think they are unfounded. The image of a world of permanent scarcity is a kind of inverted image of the optimistic growth assumptions of the sixties, and it is just as unrealistic. *Second* (and this is a more underhanded but not, I think, unfair attack), I want to suggest that the new pessimism confuses accurate social and economic prophecy with moral principles. The new pessimism is accepted as the conventional wisdom because it appeals to a particular kind of guilt in the affluent West—a guilt over the squandering of scarce resources, over the waste that is part of the middle-class Western life-style.

We are like the rake who longs to be punished for his excesses. We want to be told that the game is over and a new asceticism is the order of the day. We have built a picture of the future of the society that fits our own current moral prejudices. What is dangerous about this view is that current pessimism can lead to despair and to a withdrawal to private concerns. The new pessimism can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the young who have never before experienced a serious recession, gloom and despondency over the future are understandable. But what is surprising is how those who have lived through the recessions of 1957-58 and 1960-61 and even the Great Depression are similarly pessimistic. Certainly, our latest recession is the most severe of the postwar period. But fears about the collapse of the international economy have greatly receded in the past year. Few economists doubt that Western societies will spend their way out of this slump, as they did not know how to do or would not do during the 1930's. Crucial to the new pessimism is not the recession, nor even the prospects for another Middle East war and an oil boycott, but much more general assumptions about technology and the inherent limitations of natural resources.

**I**n teaching college students for the past ten years, I have been struck by how the attitudes of an élite minority in the middle sixties now characterize virtually the whole student population. Hostility to technology, to American capitalism, have been fashionable beliefs in liberal academic circles for a long time, but now I see these attitudes have become part of the intellectual air all middle-class youth breathe. The attitudes I am talking about are more than a simple hostility; in a curious way they suggest not merely that technology and capitalism are evil, but that they are incompetent. The college-educated, as the current Volvo commercials suggest, see American automobiles as technologically backward. Machinery, and particularly American machinery, does not work very well; it is unreliable, it has built-in obsolescence. It is a curse rather than a blessing; it does not produce wealth, it leads to unemployment; it does not liberate, it enslaves.

Assumptions like these are part of the explanation for the new pessimism. A barren technology like that depicted in Emma Rothschild's book on Detroit cannot produce new wealth; even the increasing use of computers and the expansion of the technology of communication only produce increasing structural unemployment—not real gain in the standard of living. More sophisticated writers admit that growth will continue, but argue for a much slower rate of increase in the next twenty or thirty years than since World War II. The assumption seems to be that the major technological inventions *have already been made*, that it is a matter of extending and redefining present technology and of the inevitable and constraining limits of natural resources.



Such assumptions and the arguments they support are quite unfounded. Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (circa 1800) the rate of economic growth in capitalist societies has increased, not declined. The number of applications for patents (a measure of the rate of innovation) shows the same trends. Only since World War II have we had an extraordinary rise in the number of scientists, huge research budgets, and the marrying of science and technology in the pursuit of innovation. Unless one believes that after a mere three hundred years of empirical scientific investigation most knowledge is already known, then it is likely that significant inventions will increase rather than decrease in the future. Some innovations will be useless or morally offensive, as they have been in the past—multicolored toothpaste, heat-seeking missiles, electric carving knives. Perhaps it is also true that a bureaucratically organized research team is not the best way to stimulate independent thought. But waste of intellectual resources is hardly distinctive of the modern West.

The argument based on limited resources appears, at first sight, to impose a strong restraint on economic

growth, not only in the West but in the entire world. Certainly all natural resources are finite, even the energy of the sun. Certainly the ecological balance of the earth is more delicate than we had imagined before. Western-style industrialization of the whole globe would pose an intolerable strain on this ecosystem. For these sobering insights we should be grateful to the ecologists and the environmentalists.

But these limits do not mean that the world economy is a "zero-sum" game, when limits on natural resources prevent any substantial rise in the living standards of most of the population. The new pessimism takes these theoretical limits and applies them to events within our lifetime. It prophesies disaster from oceanic and air pollution without weighing the evidence that such pollution is reversible (Lake Erie and Los Angeles). It asserts that oil supplies will be exhausted in the next fifty years without pointing out that recent new discoveries have exceeded increases in consumption. And with respect to the current food crisis, the new pessimism has it both ways. The food crisis is evidence of the inevitable failure of societies like India or Bangladesh to be able to win the food-population race. More accurately, the crisis is also seen as a product of unfavorable climate; these climatic changes are considered a result of the deterioration of the earth's ecosystem.

There is no question that natural resources are limited. But to see these limits as placing crippling limits on future growth is to make the assumption that economic growth in the future will be as energy-intensive as in the past. To move individuals by machines, to heat buildings and houses, to manufacture steel require enormous amounts of energy. And this is why energy consumption has increased so rapidly in the last quarter-century. Such a pattern will not be repeated in the future. Heavy industry, private transportation, home heating—these are not the future growth sectors of the economy. All evidence, rather, points to the fact that future growth in the West will be much less energy-intensive—in service industries, in recreation, in communication. Computers require little energy, blast furnaces a great deal. Energy limitations do not place limits on the rate of economic growth in the West; they only shape the direction that growth will take.

In the poor countries the prospects appear less optimistic. But the evidence nowhere supports the current doomsday mentality. A large part of the current disillusionment about development results from quite unrealistic expectations at the end of the Colonial era. Development meant industrialization, the use of Western technology, and a framework of Western-style institutions—parliamentary democracy, trade unions, and a free press. It is difficult to recognize how widely these ideas were believed fifteen or twenty years ago. Obviously, such expectations have been disappointed.

But if we have learned anything since the end of the Colonial era, it is that development is not primarily a matter of industrialization, or iron and steel plants. Development requires an agricultural revolution before an industrial revolution. It requires a wholesale transformation of traditional social structures—particularly in the control of the land. It is not contingent upon the vast energy consumption that has characterized the West for the last

thirty years. I do not underestimate the difficulties of such a process; it implies at least the destruction of powerful vested interests by peaceful political means—and quite probably a violent and bloody struggle culminating in a state that is inimical to our ideals of freedom, if not to our ideals of justice or equity.

These are sobering thoughts. But they should remind us that the limits to economic growth in much of the world in the foreseeable future are not the scarcity of natural resources or the fragility of the world ecosystem, but limits set by political and social structures. Only if one's model of development in the Third World is Western-style industrialization are we likely to run into the constraints of scarcities of energy and environmental resources. But does anyone imagine the majority of the adult population of India owning automobiles? Or even if this is for the moment admitted as a possibility, does anyone believe it desirable?

The new pessimism attacks the straw man—this model of Western-style development that can no longer be emulated. And because this empty model is not a feasible model it concludes that the case is hopeless, the patient cannot be saved. We begin to talk not of development but of "triage"—of saving those who have a chance of survival and leaving the rest to die. The prophecies of Heilbroner, Ehrlich, and others could be accurate, it is true. Birthrates may not come down, the green revolution may require more fertilizer than poor countries can pay for. Organized government in some countries may collapse with the consequent rise of terrorist groups.

But why do we assume that these outcomes are more likely than dramatic breakthroughs in the production of energy or in the production of foodstuffs? Why is it so unreasonable to assume that nuclear fusion (not fission) or cheap solar energy or energy from the tides cannot be developed within the next three decades? Extraordinarily cheap energy would permit production of food far in excess of current levels; it would also, significantly, permit waste on a scale undreamed of even in the affluent West. And why, in our pessimism about the economic growth of much of the world, do we neglect the fact that this world *has* experienced economic growth in the last twenty years, that food production has, except for the bad harvests of last year, kept pace with the population growth?

The reasons for this neglect have more to do with the moral beliefs of affluent Westerners than with any realities in most of the poor countries. We have come to believe that existing divisions between rich and poor countries are morally intolerable. We have come to believe that the world is a "zero-sum" game because we feel guilty about the affluence of our lives and the misery of much of the rest of the population.

We have heard this confusion of morality with prophecy before. In 1960 John Kennedy said: "The world cannot long endure half slave, half free." But it has so endured, at least for fifteen years, and we do not see the end of that condition. We have learned that in this

respect at least moral indignation may jeopardize our survival rather than provide its guarantee. It is profoundly shocking that our per capita income is over thirty times that of India. Perhaps we should feel guilty for our excessive affluence. But such guilt combined with pessimism is also a form of self-indulgence. It allows us the luxury of self-mortification while believing there is nothing we can do.

The guilt we feel is about more than the huge gap between poverty and wealth in the world. Western intellectuals have become disenchanted not only with technological progress but with economic growth. Growth has come to be defined as waste, excess, and competitive consumption, rather than dignity, choice, and freedom from backbreaking toil. Rapid growth, it seems to be assumed in the West, is bad growth—snowmobiles, convenience foods, outboard motors, nonreturnable bottles, pollution. Slower or zero economic growth, we must presume by implication, permits cross-country skiing, organic food, participant rather than spectator sports, neighborhood shops rather than supermarkets.

With such beliefs—the stuff of cocktail party talk in liberal circles—we come to the shaky bottom line of the new pessimism. We have erected a scenario of world economic development that simultaneously gratifies our desires for atonement for excess waste and that fits comfortably with our current prejudices for an apparently more ascetic life-style. It excites our moral passions to believe that our wealth is the explanation for the poverty of the Third World and that only by a vast sacrifice of our collective wealth—which, of course, few believe will be made—can the world be redeemed. Those of us who can afford to “sacrifice,” buy a foreign car (new) or a ten-speed bicycle. We climb mountains and camp with “handmade” (and therefore costly) equipment. What is intolerable to the new pessimists is the assumption that it is precisely our economic growth, and therefore our wealth, that can benefit the rest of the world.

Such an assumption may be intolerable to our moral sensibilities, but it is true; indeed, it is self-evident to all but those convinced by the faddish oversimplifications of Marxist economics. Rapid economic growth in the West, with all its inevitable waste, will stimulate de-



mand for the products of poor countries, and hence their economic growth. It will stimulate demand for Indian carpets, for Spanish and Brazilian shoes, for Portuguese wine, for Ceylonese (Sri Lanka) tea. It will increase their productivity and make human life a little less miserable in much of the world. It will not solve the hard problems of social transformation that most poor countries must confront, but it will increase the chance of a successful outcome of the process. Without growth, a bloody struggle that may engulf us all is almost inevitable.

In our own society rapid economic growth will facilitate, if it does not ensure, the mobility of minority groups. Continually increasing wealth will not guarantee that deprived groups will attain a larger share, but it means that these gains need not necessarily mean losses for the majority. Without growth, societies become ugly places indeed. Groups will compete for increasing shares of a fixed pie. To hire a black will mean unemployment for a white; a new public housing project will mean a cutback in public transportation or education.

One of the ironies of our time is that those who favor a more cooperative, less cutthroat society are also those who favor slow economic growth. Do they believe that the end of rapid growth foreshadows the beginning of a more cooperative, humane society? I suspect few think seriously about the issue. For ultimately the new pessimism and the new scarcity mentality are not consequences of a rational reassessment of the realities of the seventies; they express, mainly, a moral revulsion against a particular form of conspicuous consumption. We have sinned, we must atone. That is what lies behind the new conventional wisdom.