

V

Political Inversion

If within the very near future man cannot set limits to the interference of his tools with the environment and practice effective birth control, the next generations will experience the gruesome apocalypse predicted by many ecologists. Faced with these impending disasters, society can stand in wait of survival within limits set and enforced by bureaucratic dictatorship. Or it can engage in a political process by the use of legal and political procedures. Ideologically biased interpretations of the past have made the recognition of political process increasingly difficult. Liberty has been interpreted as a right to power tools, a right claimed without reasonable limitation by individuals and private associations in capitalist countries and by the state in socialist societies. Recovery becomes feasible only if the fundamental structure of Western societies is clearly recognized and reclaimed. Analogous efforts to recover entirely different formal structures will become necessary when former political or cultural colonies shake off the Western mode of production.

The bureaucratic management of human survival is unacceptable on both ethical and political grounds. It would also be as futile as former attempts at mass therapy. This does not, of course, mean that a majority might not at first submit to it. People could be so frightened by the increasing evidence of growing population and dwindling resources that they would voluntarily put their destiny into the hands of Big Brothers. Technocratic caretakers could be mandated to set limits on growth in every dimension, and to set them just at the point beyond which further

production would mean utter destruction. Such a *kakotopia* could maintain the industrial age at the highest endurable level of output.

Man would live in a plastic bubble that would protect his survival and make it increasingly worthless. Since man's tolerance would become the most serious limitation to growth, the alchemist's endeavor would be renewed in the attempt to produce a monstrous type of man fit to live among reason's dreams. A major function of engineering would become the psychogenetic tooling of man himself as a condition for further growth. People would be confined from birth to death in a world-wide schoolhouse, treated in a world-wide hospital, surrounded by television screens, and the man-made environment would be distinguishable in name only from a world-wide prison.

The alternative to managerial fascism is a political process by which people decide how much of any scarce resource is the most any member of society can claim; a process in which they agree to keep limits relatively stationary over a long time, and by which they set a premium on the constant search for new ways to have an ever larger percentage of the population join in doing ever more with ever less. Such a political choice of a frugal society remains a pious dream unless it can be shown that it is not only necessary but also possible: (1) to define concrete procedures by which more people are enlightened about the nature of our present crisis and will come to understand that limits are necessary and a convivial life style desirable; (2) to bring the largest number of people into now suppressed organizations which claim their right to a frugal life style and keep them satisfied and therefore committed to convivial life; and (3) to discover and revalue the political or legal tools that are accepted within a society and learn how to use them to establish and protect convivial life where it emerges. Such procedures may sound idealistic at the present moment. This is not proof that they cannot become effective as the present crisis deepens.

1. *Myths and Majorities*

The ultimate obstacle to the restructuring of society is not the lack of information about which limits are needed, nor the lack

of people who would accept them if they became inevitable, but the power of political myths.

Almost everyone in rich societies is a destructive consumer. Almost everyone is, in some way, engaged in aggression against the milieu. Destructive consumers constitute a numerical majority. Myth transforms them into a political one. Numerical majorities come to form a mythical voting bloc on a nonexistent issue; "they" are invoked as the unbeatable guardians of vested interest in growth. This mythical majority paralyzes political action. At closer inspection, "they" are a number of reasonable individuals. One is an ecologist who takes a jet plane to a conference on protecting the environment from further pollution. Another is an economist who knows that growing efficiency renders work increasingly scarce; he tries to create new sources of employment. Neither of them has the same interests as the slum-dweller in Detroit who purchases his color TV on time. The three belong no more to a voting bloc that will defend growth than clerks, repairmen, and salesmen are somehow politically homogenized because each fears for his job, needs a car, and wants medicine for his children.

There can be no such thing as a majority opposed to an issue that has not arisen. A majority agitating for limits to growth is as ludicrous a concept as one demanding growth at all cost. Majorities are not created by shared ideologies. They develop out of enlightened self-interest. The most that even the best of ideologies can do is interpret this interest. The stance each man or woman takes when a social problem becomes an overwhelming threat depends on two factors: the first is how a smoldering conflict erupts into a political issue demanding attention and partisan action; the second is the existence of new élites which can provide an interpretative framework for new—and hitherto unexpected—alignments of interest.

2. *From Breakdown to Chaos*

I can only conjecture on how the breakdown of industrial society will ultimately become a critical issue. But I can make rather firm statements about the qualifications for providing guidance within the coming crisis. I believe that growth will

grind to a halt. The total collapse of the industrial monopoly on production will be the result of synergy in the failure of the multiple systems that fed its expansion. This expansion is maintained by the illusion that careful systems engineering can stabilize and harmonize present growth, while in fact it pushes all institutions simultaneously toward their second watershed. Almost overnight people will lose confidence not only in the major institutions but also in the miracle prescriptions of the would-be crisis managers. The ability of present institutions to define values such as education, health, welfare, transportation, or news will suddenly be extinguished because it will be recognized as an illusion.

This crisis may be triggered by an unforeseen event, as the Great Depression was touched off by the Wall Street Crash. Some fortuitous coincidence will render publicly obvious the structural contradictions between stated purposes and effective results in our major institutions. People will suddenly find obvious what is now evident to only a few: that the organization of the entire economy toward the "better" life has become the major enemy of the *good* life. Like other widely shared insights, this one will have the potential of turning public imagination inside out. Large institutions can quite suddenly lose their respectability, their legitimacy, and their reputation for serving the public good. It happened to the Roman Church in the Reformation, to Royalty in the Revolution. The unthinkable became obvious overnight: that people could and would behead their rulers.

Sudden change is of a different order than feedback or evolution. Observe the whirlpools below a waterfall. For many seasons the eddies stay in the same place no matter whether the water is high or low. Then, suddenly, one more stone falls into the basin, the entire array changes, and the old can never be reconstructed. People who invoke the specter of a hopelessly growth-oriented majority seem incapable of envisaging political behavior in a crash. Business ceases to be as usual when the populace loses confidence in industrial productivity, and not just in paper currency.

It is still possible to face the breakdown of each of our various systems in a separate perspective. No remedy seems to work, but

we can still find resources to support every remedy proposed. Governments think they can deal with the breakdown of utilities, the disruption of the educational system, intolerable transportation, the chaos of the judicial process, the violent disaffection of the young. Each is dealt with as a separate phenomenon, each is explained by a different report, each calls for a new tax and a new program. Squabbles about alternative remedies give credibility to both: free schools vs. public schools double the demand for education; satellite cities vs. monorails for commuters make the growth of cities seem inexorable; higher professional standards in medicine vs. more paramedical professions further aggrandize the health professions. Since each of the proposed remedies appeals to some, the usual solution is an attempt to try both. The result is a further effort to make the pie grow, and to forget that it is pie in the sky.

The Coolidge approach to the warnings of the Depression is now applied to the signs of a much more radical crisis. General systems analysis is trusted to relate the institutional breakdowns to each other, which only leads to more planning, centralization, and bureaucracy in order to achieve control over population, affluence, and inefficient industry. Unemployment in the manufacturing sector is supposed to be compensated for by growth in the output of decisions, controls, and therapies. Fascination with industry and mechanical production still blinds people to the possibility of a postindustrial society in which several distinct modes of production would complement each other. Trying to bring about an era which is both hyperindustrial and ecologically feasible, they accelerate the breakdown of several other non-physical and equally fundamental dimensions of the balance of life.

It would be a mere exercise in geomancy to predict which series of events will play the role of the Wall Street Crash as catalyst of the first crisis of, not just in, industrial society. But it would be folly not to expect in the very near future an event whose effects will jam the growth of tools. When this happens, the noise that accompanies the crash will distract attention from seeing it in proper perspective.

We still have a chance to understand the causes of the coming

crisis, and to prepare for it. If we are to anticipate its effects, we must investigate how sudden change can bring about the emergence into power of previously submerged social groups. It is not calamity as such that creates these groups; it is much less calamity that brings about their emergence; but calamity weakens the prevailing powers which have excluded the submerged from participation in the social process. It is the power of surprise that weakens control, that shakes up the established controllers, and brings to the top those people who have not lost their bearings.

When controls are weakened, those accustomed to control must seek new allies. In the weakened economic-industrial state of the Great Depression, the establishment could not do without organized labor, so organized labor got its share of power within the structure. In the weakened labor market during the Second World War, industry could not do without black labor. The blacks began to assert their power.

3. Insight into Crisis

Forces tending to limit production are already at work within society. Public, counterfoil research can significantly help these individuals become more cohesive and self-conscious in their indictment of growth they consider destructive. We can anticipate that their voices will acquire new resonance when the crisis of overproductive society becomes acute. They form no constituency, but they are spokesmen for a majority of which everyone is a potential member. The more unexpectedly the crisis comes, the more suddenly their velleities can turn into a program. But the ability to direct events at that moment depends on how well these minorities grasp the profound nature of the crisis, and know how to state it in effective language: to declare what they want, what they can do, and what they do not need. The critical use of ordinary language is the first pivot in a political inversion. A second pivot is needed.

Further growth must lead to a multiple catastrophe. That people would accept multiple limits to growth without catastrophe seems highly improbable. The inevitable catastrophic event could be either a crisis in civilization or its end: end by annihilation.

tion or end in B. F. Skinner's world-wide concentration camp run by a T. E. Frazier. The foreseeable catastrophe will be a true crisis—that is, the occasion for a choice—only if at the moment it strikes the necessary social demands can be effectively expressed. They must be represented by people who can demonstrate that the breakdown of the current industrial illusion is for them a condition for choosing an effective and convivial mode of production. The preparation of such groups is the key task of new politics at the present moment.

I have already argued that these groups must be prepared to provide a logically coherent analysis of the catastrophic event and to communicate it in ordinary language. I have argued that they must be prepared to propose the necessity for a bounded society in practical terms that have general appeal. Sacrifice must be shown as the inevitable price for different groups of people to get what they want—or at least to be liberated from what has become intolerable. But beyond using words to describe the limits as both necessary and appealing, the leadership of these groups must be prepared to use a social tool that is fit to ordain what is good enough for all. It must be a tool which, like language, is respected by all; a tool which, like language, does not lose its power because of the purpose to which it has been put in recent history; a tool which, like language, possesses a fundamental structure that misuse cannot totally corrupt.

I have already argued that such a tool can only be the formal structure of politics and law. At the moment of the crash which is industrial rather than simply financial, the transformation of catastrophe into crisis depends on the confidence an emerging group of clear-thinking and feeling people can inspire in their peers. They must then argue that the transition to a convivial society can be, and must be, the result of conscious use of disciplined procedure that recognizes the legitimacy of conflicting interests, the historical precedent out of which the conflict arose, and the necessity of abiding by the decision of peers. Convivially used procedure guarantees that an institutional revolution will remain a tool whose goals emerge as they are enacted; the conscious use of procedure in a continually antibureaucratic sense is the only possible protection against the revolution itself becoming

an institution. Whether the application of this procedure to the inversion of all major institutions of society is then called a cultural revolution, or the recuperation of the formal structure of law, or participatory socialism or a return to the spirit of the *Fueros de España*, is merely a matter of labeling.

4. *Sudden Change*

When I speak about emerging interest groups and their preparation, I am not speaking of action groups, or of a church, or of new kinds of experts. I am above all not speaking about one political party which could assume power at a moment of crisis. Management of the crisis would make catastrophe irreversible. A well-knit, well-trained party can establish its power at the moment of a crisis in which the choice to be made is one within an over-all system. Such was the Great Depression. What was at issue was control over the tools of production. Such were the events which brought the Marxists to power in Eastern Europe. But the crisis I have described as imminent is not a crisis within industrial society, but a crisis of the industrial mode of production itself. The crisis I have described confronts people with a choice between convivial tools and being crushed by machines. The only response to this crisis is a full recognition of its depth and an acceptance of inevitable self-limitations. The more varied the perspectives from which this insight is shared by interest groups and the more disparate the interests that may be protected only by a reduction of power within society, the greater the probability that the inevitable will be recognized as such.

I am also not speaking about a majority opposed to growth on some abstract principles. Such a majority is unfeasible. A well-organized élite, vocally promulgating an antigrowth orthodoxy, is indeed conceivable. It is probably now forming. But such a programmatic antigrowth élite would be highly undesirable. By pushing people to accept limits to industrial output without questioning the basic industrial structure of modern society, it would inevitably provide more power to the growth-optimizing bureaucrats and become their pawn. One of the first results of transition toward a stable-state industrial economy would be the development of a labor-intensive, highly disciplined, and growing

subsector of production that would control people by giving them jobs. Such a stabilized production of highly rationalized and standardized goods and services would be—if this were possible—even further away from convivial production than the industrial-growth society we have now.

The proponents of a bounded society have no need to put together some kind of majority. A voting majority in a democracy is not motivated by the explicit commitment of all its members to some specific ideology or to some particular value. A voting majority in favor of a specific institutional limitation would have to be composed of very disparate elements: those seriously aggrieved by some aspect of overproduction, those who do not profit from it, and those who may have objections to the over-all organization of society—but not directly to the specific limit being set. How this functions in times of normal politics can be well illustrated by the example of school. Some people are childless and resent the school tax. Others feel they are taxed more heavily and served less well than their peers in another district. Others object to tax support of schools since they want to send their children to parochial schools. Others object to compulsory schooling as such: some because it does harm to the young and others because it fosters discrimination. All these people could form a voting majority, but not a party or a sect. Under present circumstances they might succeed in cutting school down to size, but thereby they would merely assure its more legitimate survival. A majority vote to limit one major institution tends to be conservative when business is as usual.

But a majority can have the contrary effect in a crisis which affects society on a deeper level. The joint arrival of several institutions at their second watershed is the beginning of such a crisis. The crash that will follow must make it clear that industrial society as such—and not just its separate institutions—has outgrown the range of its effectiveness.

The nation-state has become so powerful that it cannot perform its stated functions. Just as General Vo Nguyen Giap could use the U.S. military machine to win his war, so the multinational corporations and professions can now use the law and the two-party system to establish their empire. But while democracy in

the United States can survive a victory by Giap, it cannot survive one by ITT and its like. As a total crisis approaches, it becomes more obvious that the nation-state has grown into the holding corporation for a multiplicity of self-serving tools, and the political party into an instrument to organize stockholders for the occasional election of boards and presidents. In this situation, parties support each voter's right to claim higher levels of *individual* consumption and to enforce thereby higher levels of *industrial* consumption. People can claim cars, but the appropriation of society's over-all resources by a transportation system which determines that cars are useful is left to the decision of experts. Such parties support a state whose only purpose is the support of an increasing GNP, and they are obviously useless at the moment of a general crash.

When business is normal, the procedural opposition between corporations and clients usually heightens the legitimacy of the latter's dependence. But at the moment of a structural crisis not even the voluntary reduction of overefficiency on the part of major institutions will keep any of them functioning. A general crisis opens the way to social reconstruction. The loss of legitimacy of the state as a holding corporation does not destroy, but reasserts, the need for constitutional procedure. The loss of confidence in parties that have become stockholders' factions brings out the importance of adversary procedures in politics. A loss of credibility of opposing claims for more individual consumption only highlights the importance of the use of adversary procedures when the issue to be decided upon is the reconciliation of opposing sets of society-wide limitations. The same general crisis that could easily lead to one-man rule, expert government, and ideological orthodoxy is also the great opportunity to reconstruct a political process in which all participate.

The structures of political and legal procedures are integral to one another. Both shape and express the structure of freedom in history. If this is recognized, the framework of due procedure can be used as the most dramatic, symbolic, and convivial tool in the political area. The appeal to law remains powerful even where society makes access to legal machinery a privilege, or where it systematically denies justice, or where it cloaks despotism in the

mantle of show tribunals. Even when he who upholds the formal structure of ordinary language and procedure earns the scorn, ridicule, and persecution of his fellow revolutionaries, the appeal of an individual to the formal structure embedded in a people's history remains the most powerful instrument to say the truth and denounce the cancerous domination of the industrial dominance over production as the ultimate form of idolatry. I feel almost unbearable anguish when faced by the fact that only the word recovered from history should be left to us as the power for stemming disaster. Yet only the word in its weakness can associate the majority of people in the revolutionary inversion of inevitable violence into convivial reconstruction.

Reconstruction for poor countries means adopting a set of negative design criteria within which their tools are kept, in order to advance directly into a postindustrial era of conviviality. The limits to choose are of the same order as those which hyperindustrialized countries will have to adopt for the sake of survival and at the cost of their vested interest. Such social reconstruction cannot be supported by a high-powered army, both because the maintenance of such an army would foil reconstruction and because no such army would be powerful enough. Defense of conviviality is possible only if undertaken by the people with tools they control. Imperialist mercenaries can poison or maim but never conquer a people who have chosen to set boundaries to their tools for the sake of conviviality.