

# A Concluding Essay<sup>1</sup>

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In this, the final lecture, I want to briefly summarize the characteristics of the American sociocultural system and engage in a little sociology of the future. We seem to be moving into a new phase of hyper-industrialism in which our social structures and superstructures rapidly adjusting to a massive and expanding industrial infrastructure. Accordingly, both private and public bureaucracies grow and take on more and more functions from primary groups. The bonds of tradition, emotional commitment, and values continue to loosen. Rational action in the pursuit of institutional and personal goals (however defined) appears to be increasingly unchecked from within or without. What can we expect from this in the immediate future?

Industrial growth can be expected to continue for the foreseeable future. The dominant institutions in our society, both government and business, are firmly committed to economic growth. The present system is based on continued economic growth; such growth is essential to the continuation of the system itself. Stopping growth, or an equilibrium state, simply is not an option without prior social collapse and/or revolution. Fundamental reform that challenges the existence of the elite simply cannot be granted.

In response to a deteriorating environment and a declining standard of living, as well as the need for growth, industrial technology will become increasingly sophisticated, scientific, and "efficient." What is workable (in terms of technical and

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<sup>1</sup> This extract is based on the concluding chapter of *Industrializing America*, 1999, Praeger Publishers, pp. 162-171.

economic feasibility) in nuclear fusion, synthetic fuels, superconductors, solar energy, mining of the oceans, and the substitution of recyclable materials for those depleted will be developed and deployed. Pollution and depletion will increasingly be managed on a global scale. As the present environmental crisis continues to intensify, governments and international organizations will act to limit pollution and depletion of the environment. However, the ecological principles employed in fashioning the industrial infrastructure will be the principles compatible with industrial growth and other interests of existing economic and governmental elites.

By committing ourselves to economic growth, we are betting that technological development can be achieved that will tap into almost infinite supplies of energy and raw materials, with no delays in its development and deployment, at affordable prices, and with minimal physical costs to the environmental system. In order to offset the costs of depletion and pollution, our technology will have to become increasingly more complex and sophisticated.

- Technology will be called upon to tap into new energy sources, to go farther and deeper in our search for raw materials, and to restore parts of our environment that have already been destroyed.
- In addition, these technologies will increasingly have to provide food, clothing, shelter, and the industrial "good life" for over 70 percent of the world population currently living in Third World nations.
- Further, these new technologies have the additional burden of providing ever increasing amounts of energy and raw materials to fuel an expansion of existing

industrial states. This expansion is necessary to provide food, energy, and shelter to an expanding population as well as increased material wealth to our descendants.

- Finally, this new technology will have to provide ever more efficient pollution and control methods to compensate for the growth.

Personally, I place great faith in science and technology. I am aware of the potential benefits of the computer revolution and the pending biological revolution, as well as potential advances in agricultural science, new energy sources and new sources of raw materials. Still, there are limits. Technological development may be able to forestall the "overshoot and collapse" mode for the foreseeable future, but it, too, is subject to physical limits. While substitutes, recycling, and conservation measures will buy time for industrial society, they cannot provide the raw materials needed for continued growth. While technological development may be able to tap lower grades of ore, even to the point of allowing man to exploit the trace elements in the seas, these technologies are by no means assured; they are likely to require huge inputs of energy and capital to develop and deploy, and they are still bound by the ultimate limits of the earth.

Technologies such as improved crop strains, more efficient use of nonrenewable resources, improved land management, and pollution control are capable of extending the physical limits to growth, but we cannot expect these technologies to overcome environmental limits. (Technology, too, is subject to physical laws.) Further, these new technologies have to be not only technically feasible, but economically feasible as well.

It is possible that there are real environmental limits to industrial intensification. Other societies have reached the physical limits of their mode of production and have collapsed as a result (Flannery, 1994). We are as dependent upon environmental

resources as any society in the past. Aside from collapse, there is the very real possibility that despite an expanding industrial economy, despite ever more sophisticated technology, general living standards will continue to decline. This, in and of itself, could cause massive disruption in the sociocultural system.

But, putting aside the issue of environmental limits and the potential of technology to stretch them, it is evident that industrialism will continue to intensify in the foreseeable future. Given the history of industrialization and its effects on the rest of the sociocultural system, this is likely to lead to the growth in the power of bureaucracy and further disrupt traditional institutions and values.

## **Primary Groups**

As industrialization continues to intensify, primary groups such as the family and community will continue to lose many of their functions. This decline in the influence of primary groups has the potential of radically altering social life. Perhaps the greatest change in modern society in the last 30 years has been the shift in employment of married women from domestic and child-care services within the home to employment in the market economy. In large part this shift in employment has been caused by an attempt to maintain middle-class living standards in the modern economy (Harris, 1981).

A further factor behind the employment of women outside the home has been the growth of bureaucratic and service jobs caused by industrial intensification (Harris, 1981). At first, industrial intensification weakened the extended family system.

Emphasis on the nuclear family unit was essential for social and geographical mobility. Now, with both husband and wife working outside the home, this mobility is increasingly important for each. Further industrial intensification puts the nuclear family itself at risk.

One impact of industrialization on the family is smaller family size. As the state forbids child labor outside the home and increasingly provides economic security in old age, there are fewer reasons to have children. In an advanced industrial society in which married women are increasingly being employed outside the home and the cost of raising a child is a major financial commitment (and material wealth is a major value), there are even fewer reasons to have children. Having no or few children makes the marriage bond less stable. Beyond marriage, smaller family size will have implications for the extended family as well. Even without factoring in geographical and social mobility, after several generations of one or two children, there will be fewer people in one's extended family to interact with.

Again, it is possible that there are some limits, in this case human limits, to further weakening of primary groups.

## **Secondary Organization**

Socialization will increasingly take place within secondary organizations. As married women continue to work outside the home, daycare, preschool, and after-school will continue to proliferate. Socialization in secondary organizations at such an early age (many daycares now routinely care for infants as young as two weeks) teaches the child to "live" within bureaucratic structures. This increasing rationalization of socialization will speed social change, as well as expose our youth at an increasingly earlier age to the direct influence of elites. In the past, family and community influence on childhood socialization acted as a brake on rapid social change. For example, intellectuals, churches, and schools could preach tolerance and acceptance of different races, but the family preaching racism had a more direct and lasting influence on the formation of

the child's personality. With the advent of daycare, the balance began to change. These secondary organizations, organized along rational lines and subject to government regulation and inspection, socialize the child in accordance with the latest mores and conventions. Mass media programming aimed at children and children's books and movies hammer in the same message. While the child may be exposed to conflicting messages from family and later peers, the influence of these more traditional agents of socialization is waning.

The United States and other industrial nations of the world are rapidly undergoing a transition in employment from the production of goods to the production of services and "information." There are several reasons for this trend. The function of technology is in its application to traditional agricultural and manufacturing to make them more "efficient" and productive. The impact of the application of high-tech in these areas has been (and will continue to be) to reduce the number of workers needed. Domestic capital is flowing overseas at an increasing rate in search of cheap labor and more lax environmental and occupational safety laws. Production jobs that remain in advanced industrial societies are increasingly becoming automated as industrial companies attempt to reduce their wage component in order to maintain or increase existing profit levels.

As industrialization continues to intensify, demands for geographical and social mobility will continue to weaken the extended family as well as the basic nuclear family, thus putting even more demand on the service industries. Services that used to be performed by virtue of family ties are increasingly being performed by government or being integrated into the market economy. Most of these service jobs are relatively low-

pay, low-skill occupations such as kitchen helpers, custodians, and nurses' aides and orderlies.

The bulk of the much vaunted "information" occupations of the post-industrialists are the white-collar bureaucratic jobs of old. As industrial technologies become more complex and require ever greater inputs of capital to purchase and operate, corporations become larger and the need for bureaucracy to coordinate and control these far-flung empires becomes more acute. As international competition becomes more intense, we can expect corporations to become larger to meet the challenge.

The application of high-tech to these service and information occupations is lowering the overall skill levels of the workforce, making these people poorer and less educated. The new wave of automation and computerization currently sweeping through traditional bureaucracies and service organizations is done in the name of efficiency. Electronic work stations and the like are not only more efficient in performing work tasks, they are also ideal for monitoring employee performance. They offer the hope to the corporate manager of controlling the most unpredictable part of the work process--human performance. A large part of the rationalization and bureaucratization detailed above is also the direct consequence of a slowing of economic growth itself. Governments, educational institutions and other service organizations can no longer count on an ever expanding tax base--bureaucratic rationalization can be seen as an attempt to maximize efficiency with limited resources.

Recent structural changes made in response to the intensifying infrastructure also point toward increasing control through bureaucratization and the resulting oligarchy. Government and corporate growth in the twentieth century has been

phenomenal. Whatever the outcome of the environmental crisis, whether the process results in environmental collapse of technological innovations that "overcome" environmental constraints, governments and corporations will increase their power to deal with the crisis. Bureaucratic control is based on manipulation rather than terror. Modern technology and techniques have led to a concentration of economic and political power in huge bureaucracies that increasingly control social life. This control is hidden, manipulative, and almost inconspicuous, and thus it is extremely efficient and effective. In the name of welfare, efficiency, the environment, taxation, and education, not to name but a few of the laudable goals, administration has expanded and will continue to expand its power and influence. The prospects for real democracy in such a society are dismal.

It is probable that there are structural limits to the amount of centralization of control that can efficiently take place in a complex industrial society. The former Soviet Union and other highly centralized economies probably exceeded this limit. The decentralization of democratic-capitalist society relative to the Soviet model--with capitalism's reliance on markets, coordination of somewhat autonomous local bureaucracies, advanced technologies of coordination, manipulation and communication, and the almost exclusive focus on efficiency--are likely to remain within these limits.

## **Superstructure**

The focus of this course has been on the rise of rationalization or what could be called the increasing dominance of a "technological world view." The argument has been made that industrial intensification leads to the bureaucratization of structure which

promotes this rationalization process. Further (and just as important), rationalization promotes further bureaucratization, both of which encourage further intensification. People's perceptions of the world and their place in that world are greatly affected by how they go about making their living. By adopting an industrial mode of production we begin to view the world--as well as other people--as raw material, to be manipulated and exploited for our own ends. Goal oriented rationality becomes our habitual way of thought. To state this more poetically: "Once, the governing human metaphor was pastoral or agricultural, and it clarified, and so preserved in human care, the natural cycles of birth, growth, death, and decay. But modern humanity's governing metaphor is that of the machine. Having placed ourselves in charge of creation, we began to mechanize both the creation itself and our conception of it. We began to see the whole creation merely as raw material, to be transformed by machines into a manufactured paradise" (Berry, 1977). Max Weber called this process rationalization, Wendell Berry calls it a change of "governing metaphor," Jacques Ellul (1964) labeled it the rise of "technique." It has become the dominant way that industrial peoples perceive their world.

According to C. Wright Mills (1959), the most important questions to ask of society is "What kinds of men and women does it tend to create? What personal styles of life does it inculcate and reinforce?" Asking these questions with respect to the future of industrial society is not reassuring. Increasingly our lives are being spent in rational secondary organizations designed to perform like machines. These hierarchical organizations are dominated by the goals and "values" of economic elites. As we have seen, in response to declines in living standards, we have intensified industrial activity

and put greater stress on bureaucratic efficiency in our dominant institutions. The efficient operation of these organizations depends upon the workers' ability to perform the narrowly specialized role assigned to maximize organizational efficiency. Clients of the organization (or patients, or customers, or students) are likewise dehumanized, treated as categories based on status rather than as human beings. Participation in these organizations demands a rational mind-set, a habit of thought that has become our way of perceiving the physical and social world. A society increasingly dominated by such organizations, one that socializes its children into these organizations at an increasingly early age, is going to inculcate and reinforce men and women whose values can be stated on a balance sheet.

But there are many who find the existing sociocultural system unsatisfying. It is arguable that increasing numbers of people are either dropping out of participation in the system or searching for alternative lifestyles. Millions of others seem to be going through the motions, "playing the game" without commitment or purpose. Some detect rising levels of disaffection among our youth. The underclass, too, appears to be increasing in numbers, and the middle class is in decline. Perhaps the rise of alienation, cynicism, and apathy indicate that increasing numbers of people are no longer finding either physical or psychological gratification in the existing industrial order. If so, it may be the social actions of the disaffected (shades of Marx's proletariat) that will bring change to the sociocultural system.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to suppose that a technological world view completely dominates industrial societies even among those who fully participate in the system. There are still both traditional and religious institutions. There are many

who are still guided by traditional and religious values, that still have significant impact on the rest of the sociocultural system. There are deeply religious men and women in our society who are horrified with recent social change and strive to interpret their vision of a just society into social action. Much of this social activism is particularly effective at the local level--food banks, shelters for the homeless, free clinics. There are other advocates of social justice who are guided by more secular values, and again, these men and women are not without success. Tradition and religion may be waning, their current role in the world could be interpreted as rear guard activities--pale remnants of what once was. But perhaps there will be a religious rebirth, or a revival of the humanist tradition.

Recent history has seen the rapid rise of a new alternative world view--that of ecology. The ecology movement, as it has evolved in the last 30 years, has become ever more consciously opposed to the dominant technological world view. What began as an environmentalist critique of certain industrial abuses very quickly broadened to a general hostility toward the industrial system's exploitation and degradation of the earth and further still to a general critique of industrial society itself. The appeal of the ecology movement is based on a growing skepticism of both technology and the ability of present-day institutions to control its use. It is connected with a general feeling of unease about the future of industrial society. It is not, at least not in its broader social expression, based solely on ecological science. The movement contains elements of romanticism, religious values, ethics, revolutionary politics, and millennialism to name a few. What holds the movement together is a common world view, a holistic world view that is based on the interconnections between systems.

The ecology movement is increasingly a force to be reckoned with by both government and industry. Elements of the movement have been institutionalized. Its ideology has demonstrated power in mobilizing people to at least consider values other than immediate material benefit; at times it has even inspired some to act in an altruistic manner. As industrialization continues to intensify, the movement can be expected to both broaden and strengthen. It is perhaps in the resolution of this struggle between two competing worldviews that the future of industrial society will be decided.

It is fitting to close with a quote from Max Weber, who also engaged in speculation on the future possibilities of industrial systems. While Weber had a foreboding of an "iron cage" of bureaucracy and rationality, he recognized that human beings are not mere subjects molded by sociocultural forces. We are both creatures and creators of sociocultural systems. And even in a sociocultural system that increasingly institutionalizes and rewards goal oriented rational behavior in pursuit of wealth and material symbols of status there are other possibilities: "No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals or, if neither, mechanized petrification embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has obtained a level of civilization never before achieved'" (Weber, 1921, p. 181).

There are still many possibilities, many possible futures. Ours could be one that we choose.