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A Western form of Zen might be better

## Capitalism: a Terminal Case?

By Amitai Etzioni

CAPITALISM will gradually lose its form over the next several generations and will be dead by the year 2076, Robert L. Heilbroner predicts in his new book, *Business Civilization in Decline*.

Heilbroner, who is Norman Thomas Professor of Economics at the New School for Social Research, sees capitalism as an economic, political, and cultural system—a system doomed by internal contradictions and by environmental constraints. As an economic system, capitalism requires an insatiable amount of resources, yet the world is rapidly running out of resources.

Moreover, attempts to generate new resources run into a second constraint: the industrial process is noxious, and hence technological solutions to the scarcity of resources are not practical because of the environmental hazards they generate.

As a socio-political system, capitalism assumes that economic interests can control the state so as to maintain conditions that favor the market. First among these conditions, Heilbroner writes, is an extremely skewed distribution of rewards.

### A New Statist System

These systems of privilege were tolerated (albeit with increasing challenges by the "have-nots" both in the United States and abroad) as long as capitalism was producing an ever-expanding avalanche of material goods.

But because this stream is petering out, and because the value of material goods is increasingly perceived as hollow, the state—used by capitalism to protect itself—will turn against it. Specifically, the tools of planning and the planners themselves (experts, civil servants, and so forth)

### Business Civilization in Decline

by Robert L. Heilbroner

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will be at the core of the transition to a new statist system.

The cultural base of capitalism, Heilbroner writes—noting that he builds here on Joseph Schumpeter, but also drawing on Max Weber—is an orientation to the world that is open-minded (needed in the search for ever more efficient means to given purposes), calculating, and skeptical.

That orientation is now losing legitimacy as the concern for sheer survival is becoming paramount. There is also a growing awareness that the distribution of rewards in capitalism (the privileges) is increasingly dissociated from achievements (productivity, entrepreneurship), but tied to monopolistic control as well as domestic and international concentration of power (the multinational corporation).

As I see it, there is nothing shockingly new or even improbable in suggesting that capitalism will be transformed over the next hundred years into some fundamentally different system. Those who disagree are somewhat handicapped by a prediction carefully set into the distant future, but this is a difficulty all long-run predictions face.

Heilbroner's doomsday machine is somewhat less convincing, although certainly the consensus of experts at the moment leans his way. I can imagine (and imagination is our main and best tool for dealing with the longer-run future) technological breakthroughs that would provide

both new bounties of energies and less pollution than existing technologies. Someone is already seeking a patent in 82 countries for a procedure that separates the oxygen and hydrogen in water into two sources of energy, a procedure which is said to be self-sustaining once triggered.

The idea that the knowledge-makers and the so-called planners whom industrialism promoted will compose the new class that will usher in the new social structure was introduced by James Burnham in *The Managerial Revolution*, then borrowed by Daniel Bell, and now reincarnated by Heilbroner.

### Scatter-Gun Pot-Shots

I agree that this "class" may inadvertently transform capitalism, although so far it has shown little taste for coalescing, acting in unison, or for developing a class consciousness, identity, power, and vision. Most knowledge-makers are servants of the system, only occasionally taking poorly aimed, scatter-gun pot-shots at it from the sidelines. They are a sorry replacement for the role the proletariat was to play in the Marxist scenario.

The essence of the change which is occurring (Charles Reich was one of the first to get a glimpse of it) is not technological-economic or socio-political, but "cultural." Capitalism is no longer providing a compelling set of meanings, a commanding source of value, for an ever larger number of people.

Those who have not "made it" increasingly question whether working hard and saving will usher them into the materialistic garden of Eden—and if it does, they wonder if the trip is worth the price. Those who have "made it" turn increasing attention to other human needs in the Maslowian hierarchy: to affection,

self-esteem, and self-actualization.

It is not that these needs were completely dormant in earlier days, waiting for basic "creature needs" to first be fully sated; but that, until the 1960's, most members of industrial society seem to have accepted the proposition that acquisitions were required—beyond securing food, drink, and shelter—to express affection (promise her anything, but give her . . .), self-esteem (size and number of cars, pools, boats, houses, appliances) and even self-actualization (the false sense of power derived from driving a high-horsepower automobile).

The breakthrough of the counter-culture toward a much simpler, sensual, communal life is *not* the new model to be followed; it is too extreme a pattern for the masses to emulate.

But like other extreme models, quick to burn out, this sect-like movement seems to affect a very large number of people in moderate and subtle ways. The criticism of materialism is catching on; millions work less hard, save less, study longer, retire earlier, spend more time in "inner space," become involved in pop culture and public affairs.

In these and other ways they find that the shorter route to the greater satisfaction of their basic needs lies in dealing directly with other persons and the self, rather than allowing objects to distort these relations.

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They discover that affection, esteem, and self-actualization build these relations.

I do not believe that the socio-cultural future can be foretold, so I can only speculate on what the consequences would be if more and more millions of relatively comfortable Americans were to overcome their addiction to materialism, delegate objects to their proper corner, and deal with their other human needs directly.

Then, by definition, we would need ever fewer resources and energy and would be less subject to the demands of resource producers. We would work, save, and compete less, and we would have greater enjoyment of each other, of culture, of community work—and of self. The choices are richer than either continuing the hysterical pursuit of "more" or returning to the Stone Age. We could accord production a *secondary* place, while other pursuits could take priority.

### The Limits of Altruism

As to the polity—for reasons Heilbroner correctly calls the limits of altruism—the only sociological conditions under which it seems plausible for the "haves" to share truly and deeply their wealth with the "have-nots," rather than give tokens covered with mountains of pious rhetoric, is when the "haves" come to view additional acquisitions as uninteresting, and when they see those pursuits which are *not* governed by the laws of scarcity—love, dignity, culture, community participation—as prime sources of satisfaction.

I doubt that such a new world would preserve capitalism in any of the senses that Heilbroner has defined it. I am also relatively confident that such a world would not cherish planners, knowledge-makers, or state socialism. A Western form of Zen Buddhism, with every person a priest, seems more compatible. But then who knows what the future holds?

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