

Once in a while a master sense-making article comes along--such as on today's [10Oct77] NYT OpEd page. Where, in this "Gulf Stream," is the presence of the Kingdom?

Trying To Make Sense of It

By Robert L. Heilbroner

Is it possible to make sense of what is going on in the world, to set oneself for the future? Of course we cannot predict the sudden storms of history. But history is more than storms; it is also a great Gulf Stream, carrying us along on its broad currents. Here are a few dead reckonings on the directions in which I think that stream is moving, and a few reflections on what we must anticipate as we go with its currents.

1. *We cannot expect social contentment from economic growth.* This strikes me as one of the few important lessons we can learn from the last half century. There was a time, not so long ago, when statesmen and scholars alike believed that economic growth brought social well-being in its train—that the cure for social and political disaffection, for riots and radicalism, was simply more income.

I no longer think we can indulge in that lulling belief. We have had a half century of unprecedented economic improvement, both here and abroad. No doubt that growth has alleviated much misery and has staved off much unrest. But I do not think anyone can say that it has brought a general sense of well-being, contentment, good will, gratitude. This has very sobering implications for capitalist societies, which have always assumed that wealth alone would bring stability, morale, commitment to the system.

2. *Western industrial societies are moving both toward planning and toward the market.* Looking back over the last 50 years, it is clear that all Western societies have moved in the direction of economic planning. It is also clear that planning is more cumbersome, infuriating, inefficient, and bureaucratic than most planners had anticipated. It is not surprising, then, that we now hear a clamor to remedy the problems of planning by returning to the mechanism of the market, with its self-firing stimulus of individual betterment and its winnowing force of competition.

What the enthusiasts for market "solutions" overlook is that the market brings its own difficulties. Unemployment, economic instability, social neglect, the exercise of intolerable private power are all byproducts of the market process. They are why planning arose in the first place, and why it will arise again if the scope of the market is broadened. Thus, planning generates a need for the market, and the market generates a need for planning. Between this Scylla and Charybdis all Western economies must make their way.

3. *The deepest subversive threat to capitalism is the acquisitive drive on which it depends.* Acquisitiveness is the form of social behavior nurtured and encouraged by capitalist society. Under the name of the Profit Motive it is regarded as the very *élan vital* of the system. Considered as Bettering Our Condition (as Adam Smith put it), acquisitiveness is the socially approved motive for all citizens, workers and capitalists alike.

Yet for all the esteem in which acquisitiveness is held, we have always recognized that it is a dangerous form of social behavior. When it seeps into the world of politics, it is no longer useful but corrupting.

When it is given free reign—the policeman, the stagehand, or the business man maximizing his gains with-

out social constraints—it creates unmanageable economic pressures and disruptions. To the extent that it suffuses the social ethic—each citizen absorbed in his or her private advantage, heedless of public consequences or public needs—it brings social dissolution. Thus acquisitiveness imperils capitalism while it sustains it. I do not know if this profound inner contradiction must ultimately undo capitalism, but it is certain to trouble it as long as the system exists.

4. *The threat within socialism is its commitment to virtue.* Is socialism inherently totalitarian, so that China and the Soviet Union are in fact its representative models? There is undoubtedly a latent threat of coercion within an economy oriented to planning, just as there is a latent threat of breakdown in an economy built on the market. But I am interested in a potential source of totalitarianism at a deeper level. For I can see that there is a buried danger in socialism comparable to that posed by acquisitiveness within capitalism. It is the danger implicit in the socialist belief in the perfectability of man.

Socialism is dedicated to the idea that men and women can be virtuous, not merely voracious. Accordingly, socialist governments—the best of them, not the worst—seek to create good societies, not just affluent ones. But the trouble with good societies is that it is difficult for them to tolerate dissent.

Disagreements about policies or ideas that can be regarded by morally unconcerned societies as mere choices among expedients tend to be regarded by morally committed societies as choices between good and evil. In this way, aberrant behavior or belief threaten to become identified with moral turpitude.

Thus I think that a seed of totalitarianism resides even in the best government that pursues virtue for the society it governs. But I do not believe that all socialist governments

must become Soviet Unions or Chinas any more than I believe that all capitalist governments must become like the United States.

We have seen democratic socialism practiced in Israeli kibbutzim, and we have had a glimpse of it on a larger scale in pre-invasion Czechoslovakia. So, too, in Scandinavia we have seen capitalism with a human face. Nonetheless, both kinds of systems harbor dangerous tendencies—social decay in capitalism, democratic decline in socialism.

Do these sightings and reflections help make sense of things? I repeat that they are not predictions. They give no warning with regard to the source or ferocity of the next storm. Perhaps, however, they tell us something about the direction in which the Gulf Stream is taking us in fair weather as well as foul.

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