Getting Along Without Doomsday

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Many of our leading pundits these days [1975] are determined to persuade us that we must give up our liberties and submit to some central authority if we hope to save civilization from the catastrophes they say are at hand. Here is a reply to those doomsday fanciers.

When we look back over the history of mankind, we see certain beliefs cropping up again and again in different societies and different centuries, each time being proved wrong by events yet, in spite of that, retaining perennial appeal. One is the belief that society is about to be made perfect. Another is the belief that mankind is about to be destroyed. In spite of their falsification in the experience of each generation, these beliefs go on being held widely in each new generation. How is this to be explained? The answer, I suppose, is obvious in general terms, though in the case of each individual believer there may be endless complications and qualifications. The beliefs in question (and the ones I have given are only examples) must meet a common psychological need that goes so deep as to insist on satisfaction regardless of the evidence.

The matter is not one of historical interest only, for beliefs of this kind, including both my examples, play a conspicuous role in our own society. In this article I want to look at just one of them: the belief that mankind is about to be destroyed.

The idea is by no means only a Christian one, or only a religious one. In the first few pages of the Old Testament we read that *"the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them"* (Genesis 6:7). In the twentieth century the belief is more lively and popular than ever before, though among us — ours being an irreligious age — it assumes some entirely secular forms. And because of the rapidity of change in our society, and the voracity of the media, these forms are liable to supersede one another in rapid succession.

Consider what a parade of them there has been in the short period since the Second World War. First there was the conviction, held quite widely, that mankind was about to plunge into a nuclear holocaust that would destroy all life on this planet. That expectation eventually lost support to the different and longer-term conviction that mankind was going to destroy itself by overpopulation. That had a good run, but had to yield to the belief that man was poisoning the world with chemical waste products and was going to destroy himself that way. This in its turn was replaced by the doctrine that, since the physical resources of our planet are finite, the wherewithal to sustain life was bound to run out, so that mankind would either die of deprivation or destroy itself in a struggle for survival. And only the other day I came upon the following in a London Times review of a book published by the BBC: "Mr. Calder concludes that a new ice age cometh. What is more, it could come quickly; that is within the lifetime of most of us."

Having lived in the period when these views were popular, I am struck by several peculiarities about them. First, although most of them are logically unconnected, and some are mutually contradictory, they were all accepted and promoted by roughly the same people. And — this may be merely a comment on the circles I happen to move in, but I do not think so — their appeal seemed to be preponderantly to people of a certain left-wing persuasion. Many of my acquaintances moved from one to the next as each in its turn became fashionable. Some embraced two or more simultaneously. A few heroically muddled individuals tried to believe all of them at once.

This element of modishness was another striking characteristic of these beliefs. In some circles, both in Europe and the United States, it was intellectually stylish to embrace these attitudes: it showed you were up on the latest ideas and concerned about what was going on in the world. It put you ahead of the people who didn't believe them, and in an elusive but important way marked you as superior. As each of these attitudes in its turn approached the height of intellectual fashion, it became the subject of national and international conferences, articles in “aware” journals, best-selling books by marketplace academics (some of whom showed great skill in extracting funds from big foundations to set up special study projects), and, during the overripe phase, television documentaries. Each gave rise to a jargon and a rhetoric that left deposits in the language. And the fact that they displaced each other so quickly as intellectual fashions no more weakened the intensity of people's addiction to them than changing of fashions does in the case of clothes.

If these attitudes had a common characteristic even more dislikable than the assumption of moral and intellectual superiority, it was fanaticism. A lot of devotees became strident bigots incapable of rational discussion. Anyone who disagreed with them was denounced as a criminal fool endangering the survival of the human race. Many never seriously listened to opponents, and in consequence misrepresented them drastically yet sincerely. As individuals they responded to even the mildest dissent in aggressive, disturbed ways, and when taken to task for their hysteria, defended it on the grounds that it was a natural human response to the impending holocaust and the obtuseness of their fellow men.

As an activist in left-wing politics I have been touched by each of the modern doomsday movements I listed earlier, except for the ice-age movement, which, as of this writing, hasn't had time to catch on yet. In each case the basic pattern of my experience has been the same. First, by their campaigning and persistence the movement's advocates caused me to look with new urgency at a familiar danger and evaluate it afresh. In the course of doing this I listened to the movement's main speakers and read its main books. Naturally, I also developed a new interest in the arguments of its opponents. And in each case (so far) I found myself pushed eventually to the same conclusion: although the danger to which the movement was drawing attention was real and serious, the doom that so many of its members proclaimed as inevitable was not inevitable at all, and because of this the panic measures they advocated were usually irrelevant and often socially destructive.

Of course, one must distinguish between the intellectual content of these various beliefs, which is what their merits have to be judged by, and the emotional needs that believing them satisfies. If what a man believes is true, then it is true whatever his motives may be, and criticism of his motives can do nothing to invalidate that truth. So before we come to grips with the needs doomsday beliefs satisfy, we must take their arguments seriously.

A prominent feature of doomsday arguments is that — in spite of the obviously “religious” character of the people they appeal to and the cults they nourish — they present themselves as rational and scientific. Lavish reference is made to nuclear physics, biochemistry, the ecosphere, population statistics, meteorology, or whatever. Figures, measurements, and calculations are bandied about. Chains of logical and practical reasoning are called upon to demonstrate that certain future effects must inevitably follow from certain present causes. It is in order, then, for us to examine the conception of science on which the arguments rest.

A scientific theory about the world is distinguished from unscientific ones by the fact that it is falsifiable. We can specify what experimental observations or results would disprove it and then subject it to these tests. If a theory cannot be tested in this way it is not scientific. That is not to say that it is untrue, or nonsensical, but only that we cannot provide anyone with compelling grounds for believing it. I suspect most of my readers already assume something of the sort, even if they are not able to explain why. For

instance, most would agree, without needing to reflect, that the statement “God exists” is a meaningful statement, and that it could conceivably be true, but that it is not a scientific statement. By this criterion statements about the future can be scientific only if some time limit is put to them. “Sooner or later it will rain in Death Valley” can never be falsified, but “it will rain in Death Valley before the end of this year” can be, and at the end of the year we shall know whether or not it has been.

The important thing to note about statements of the first kind is that they can be settled, but only one way: they can be proved true, but they can never be proved false. (They are thus the logical opposites of scientific laws, which can be proved false but can never be proved true.) If I choose to utter a statement of this form, and you dispute it, the issue between us will either be settled in my favor or it will never be settled at all; the one thing that is logically certain is that it can never be settled in your favor. Little wonder, then, that fanatical beliefs whether religious, political, or of any other kind have a tendency to be couched in this form. As Karl Popper has shown in the cases of Marxism and psychoanalysis, it is the impossibility of those thought-systems ever being proved wrong that constitutes their most powerful appeal to their adherents and at the same time rules them out of court as scientific theories.

By this criterion everyone no longer living who held that the world or mankind was going to come to an end in his lifetime believed a historical theory that was scientific, falsifiable, and that has now been falsified. Living believers can say, “Ah, but the fact that they have always been wrong in the past does not prove that we are wrong now.” Of course it does not. But it would make any reasonable man highly skeptical about holding yet another version of this perennially falsified belief.

And— bitter paradox, this: although believers defend themselves by denying the relevance of past to future in this one respect, the false assumption of precisely such a connection is the most important fallacy contained in their positive views. All the examples I have given rest on the projection into the future of existing trends. To take an example at random from The Limits to Growth, a report made for the Club of Rome in 1972:

“The world's known reserves of chromium are about 775 million metric tons, of which about 1.85 million metric tons are mined annually at present. Thus, at the current rate of use, the known reserves would last about 420 years. . . . The actual world consumption of chromium is increasing, however, at the rate of 2.6 percent annually. . . . That growth rate, if it continues, will deplete the reserve stock, not in 420 years . . . but in just 95 years. If we suppose that reserves yet undiscovered could increase present known reserves by a factor of five ... this fivefold increase would extend the lifetime of the reserves only from 95 to 154 years.”

It all seems very plausible and “scientific.” Figures like these have been worked out for all the world's main natural resources, and the same basic argument has been applied in other spheres: “The current rate of pollution is such and such. Therefore, in so many years we shall have poisoned our environment to such a point that we shall no longer be able to live in it.” Or: “At present rates of increase the world's population will be so much by such and such a year and this is insupportable, so there will have to be either famine or war.” Or: “Throughout history great powers have made war against each other with every means of destruction at their disposal. Therefore, nothing can stop them from doing so again.”

These arguments embody a fundamental misunderstanding of the way change occurs. For, in fact, it almost never takes the form of present trends continuing indefinitely. It takes a wide variety of different forms, and most of them are unlike the linear model. Many, for example, are organic. There is an old Italian proverb: “The trees do not reach the sky,” that is, the acorn grows into an oak and stops indeed, it begins to shrink after a time, then withers and rots. A large number of human activities and institutions have a life cycle like this. An even larger number have a structure that is neither linear nor

organic but, roughly speaking, dialectical. We confront a problem situation; the steps we take to solve the problem create a new situation; but the changes have repercussions, some of which were unforeseen, and the new situation itself makes unforeseen demands on us — so we now have a new set of problems. It is an elementary fact about the past that the future has almost never been accurately foreseen. We move from one unexpected situation to another. Why the doomsday men do not see this and reflect on it is baffling at first. Man would simply not have survived if he was a trend follower rather than a problem solver, precisely because — as the doomsday men themselves keep saying — following trends would lead him to destruction.

The most important of the many things the doomsday men get wrong is their failure to see that the primary constituent in the process of change is the process of problem solving. This process is one of endless feedback: we keep altering our actions and expectations in the light of changing circumstances, with the result that we are never where we once expected to be, and never think or want what we once thought we were going to think or want.

So while it is impossible to prove that the doomsayers are wrong, it is also impossible for their opponents to say what is going to happen in place of what the doomsayers prophesy, a double disadvantage when it comes to popular debate. To take a topical example, I have no idea how mankind is going to solve its energy problems. But I am as certain as I am of anything that those who talk about exhausting available supplies are talking nonsense. Every day tens of thousands of times as much energy as the whole world consumes reaches us from the sun. The tides of the world's oceans ceaselessly exert an incalculable amount of untapped energy. So does the rotation of the earth on its axis. The entire universe consists of matter in motion. The sources of power are unlimited. The only problem, a very real one, is how to tap them. But the obvious thing to expect is that mankind will continue trying to solve its problems by tapping ever new sources. In fact, it is inconceivable that man will not make the attempt. And his attempts will transform our environment.

The childlike linear model, with its dramatic but hopelessly unrealistic projection from the past, has been lampooned by some of the most famous satirical writers. Mark Twain once wrote:

"In the space of one hundred and seventy-six years the Lower Mississippi has shortened itself two hundred and forty-two miles. That is an average of a trifle over one mile and a third per year. Therefore, any calm person, who is not blind or idiotic, can see that in the Old Oölitic Silurian Period, just a million years ago next November, the Lower Mississippi River was upwards of one million three hundred thousand miles long, and stuck out over the Gulf of Mexico like a fishing rod. And by the same token any person can see that seven hundred and forty-two years from now the Lower Mississippi will be only a mile and three quarters long, and Cairo and New Orleans will have joined their streets together, and be plodding comfortably along under a single mayor and a mutual board of aldermen." This is so close to the reality of much doomsday writing that it is scarcely a parody.

If one selects any period in the past and reads what people wrote about the future as they saw it, one is astonished at the simple truth that we are all trying to evade, which is that we do not know what is going to happen. I apologize for stating such an obvious piece of the obvious, but there are few of us who will accept it and face its consequences: how wildly off base they were. The mistake nearly everyone makes is failing to take account of the phenomenon of emergence, genuine newness, not only in the world but in ideas and attitudes. We can conceive of the future only in terms of the present, because we have only existing concepts to conceive in and think with. So it is literally impossible for us to know in any detail how things are going to be. In our own case we forget this all the time, yet it is self-evident to us when we think about the past, self-evident, for instance, that it would not have been possible even for, say, Tolstoy, an imaginative genius, to envisage the social reality of the Soviet Union,

despite the fact that he died less than seven years before the Russian Revolution. We in our turn can be fairly sure, I think, that whatever lies ahead of us is as unenvisageable to us as the Gulag Archipelago was to Tolstoy.

This phenomenon has also been much satirized. G. K. Chesterton's novel, The Napoleon of Notting Hill, published in 1904, opens with a whole chapter of amusing examples, from which I fillet the following central argument:

"The human race, to which so many of my readers belong, has been playing at children's games from the beginning. . . . And one of the games to which it is most attached is called ... 'Cheat the Prophet.' The players listen very carefully and respectfully to all that the clever men have to say about what is to happen in the next generation. The players then wait until all the clever men are dead, and bury them nicely. Then they go and do something else. That is all. . . . All these clever men were at work giving accounts of what would happen in the next age, all quite clear, all quite keen-sighted and ruthless, and all quite different. . . . The way the prophets of the twentieth century went to work was this. They took something or other that was certainly going on in their time, and then said it would go on more and more until something extraordinary happened."

The simple truth that we are all trying to evade is that we do not know what is going to happen. I apologize for stating such an obvious piece of the obvious, but there are few of us who will accept it and face its consequences. All the well-known doomsday books exhibit the same confusion: not knowing, yet talking as if they do know. The most influential tract in our own day, The Limits of Growth, says on page 93 that "*if we wanted to predict the size of the earth's population in 1993 within a few percent, we would need a very much more complicated model than the one described here. We would also need information about the world system more precise and comprehensive than is currently available."* On pages 169-70 it says that the most probable result of letting things take their course and waiting to see what will happen "*will be an uncontrollable decrease in population and capital. The real meaning of such a collapse is difficult to imagine because it might take so many different forms. It might occur at different times in different parts of the world, or it might be worldwide. It could be sudden or gradual."*

The Limits of Growth goes on to argue that we should avert this collapse by establishing what it calls an "equilibrium state." It acknowledges that this would involve the sacrifice of basic freedoms, yet it has no clear conception of what it is urging us to make these sacrifices for. "*What would life be like in such an equilibrium state? Would innovation be stifled? Would society be locked into the patterns of inequality and injustice we see in the world today? Discussion of these questions must proceed on the basis of mental models, for there is no formal model of social conditions in the equilibrium state. No one can predict what sort of institutions mankind might develop under these new conditions."*

Not surprisingly, then, since it has no idea of what sort of society it is advocating, the report is completely at sea on the question of how to get there. "*We can say very little at this point about the practical, day-by-day steps that might be taken to reach a desirable, sustainable state of global equilibrium. Neither the world model nor our own thoughts have been developed in sufficient detail to understand all the implications of the transition from growth to equilibrium."*

Yet only three pages after the last of these confessions of vagueness and ignorance comes the sentence: "*The way to proceed is clear, and the necessary steps, although they are new ones for human society, are well within human capabilities."*

The Limits to Growth is typical of the genre not only in its intellectual weakness but in two other respects. First, the bulk of it is an analysis of our current problems, but it offers only a few sketchy, ambiguous, and brief proposals for action, and no concrete conception of the state of affairs it really advocates. Incidentally, this description fits the most famous and influential doomsday book in modern

history, Marx's Das Kapital, and that, no doubt, has some relationship to the fact that subsequent Communist societies are almost nothing like the ones Marx envisaged and would almost certainly have been rejected by him. The second typical characteristic, again outstandingly exemplified by Das Kapital, is that having seduced the susceptible with a distinctive rhetoric, and having omitted almost any consideration of what can be done by human choice and action, The Limits of Growth immediately proclaims the regrettable need for an interim period of authoritarian government to meet the crisis.

With this we have arrived at the first of the two deep-lying, sinister, and unacknowledged emotional cravings that doomsday beliefs satisfy in many people: the craving for authoritarian government. There invariably comes a point in the analysis at which we are told that the imminent cataclysm is so apocalyptic that the pluralistic freedoms of open societies are going to have to be sacrificed (alas) so that all resources can be devoted to the aim of survival. Although this is always presented as a lamentable necessity, it is seldom backed up by serious argument. If its proponents really did regard it as an appalling evil, they would accept it in despair, and only after the most stringent examination of the case for it, accompanied by the most searching investigation of alternatives. But we are never given the alternatives. After a lot of colorful and emotionally appealing rhetoric about the imminence of disaster, the doom-watchers simply assert the need to abandon basic freedoms and denounce anyone who questions its necessity. (“Wouldn't you rather be Red than dead, you mad fool?” Or: “You mean you want freedom for polluters to go on poisoning the world?” Or ...) The point I am making is that although the doom watchers say they are upset at the prospect of having to sacrifice freedom, their disregard of all serious argument against the need to do so, the indecent haste with which they embrace the authoritarian option, and the self-righteous passion with which they try to ram it down everyone's throat belie their words. Anyone watching them over a period of years is forced to the conclusion that although they will not admit it to themselves, they really like the prospect of authoritarian government. They want freedom destroyed. When I said earlier that doomsday ideas seemed to appeal preponderantly to people of a certain left-wing persuasion, what I had in mind was the authoritarian left as opposed to the liberal left. A striking number of the most famous of the doomsday prophets are disillusioned Marxists.

This brings me to the second and deepest of their emotional satisfactions. Anyone who has much to do with apocalyptic politics, whether of the left or right, is struck by the frequency with which hatred of the existing society is revealed as the hidden root of idealism. If one interrogates young people who think things are just wonderful in China, or Cuba, or North Vietnam, or Eastern Europe, their answers almost invariably lead one to their rejection of their own society (there just has to be a good society somewhere, and it obviously isn't here; and the grass is bound to be greener on the other side). Indeed, one of the elements is their reconstruction. Even the Revelation of Saint John devotes a good deal of space to a gloating description of the physical destruction of Imperial Rome on the Day of Judgment.

Similarly, the lip-smacking relish with which our twentieth-century prophets proclaim the imminent destruction of our society is unmistakable. They are thrilled by it. They want it. Perhaps they want to revenge themselves on it because it is not perfect. Perhaps, more particularly, they want to revenge themselves on it because it has not fulfilled the dreams of perfection they had when they were young it has betrayed them, betrayed their hopes and ideals, and to the extent that they have devoted themselves to political action, it has made a mockery of their lives.

It was Marx who said that the real point of a political or social theory was revealed in what it was used to justify, be it in terms of social reality or political action. By this token, the real point of doomsday theories is revealed in their masochistic insistence that we must either submit to authority or be destroyed, and the justification they seek for the sacrifice, which they advocate, of freedom.

End of article

Bryan Magee, a Labourite, was returned to the House of Commons in October, 1974, by the voters of Waltham Forest, Leyton.