

Review

The Future of Technological Civilization. By VICTOR FERKISS. New York: George Braziller, Inc. 1974. 369 pages. \$12.50.

In the past year and a half we have been engaged by several stirring and challenging reflections on the future. Besides this major book by Ferkiss, at least two others come to mind—Robert Heilbroner's *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* and Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. Bell's "venture in social forecasting" is at distinct odds with the reflections of both Heilbroner and Ferkiss. He sees neither catastrophic reversals nor necessary utopias ahead for us or for the human race in general. But Heilbroner and Ferkiss go well together. Heilbroner, in *The Human Prospect*, sketches out the grim society that will result when we finally come to an inescapable confrontation with the finitude of the natural world. He does not think humans have the capacity to act upon this unhappy but certain knowledge of the future. By the time we react, it will be too late and we will be sentenced to an authoritarian society without freedoms, security, or peace. Ferkiss disagrees with Heilbroner's assessment of our ability to respond to the already foreseen crisis. He believes we have the intelligence and will to avert such a future. Indeed, we have the capacity to construct a much more human world than we have at present. However, if we do not choose to act constructively in the face of the present crisis, the Heilbroner scenario will be a sure outcome.

Ferkiss, professor of government at Georgetown University and author of *Technological Man*, argues for a necessary utopia, a possible new order that we can actually construct. In passionately putting forth his proposal Ferkiss tries to cover all the bases—he attempts to be both systematic and comprehensive. In doing so he draws from many fields—the natural and biological sciences, political theory, theology, history, American studies, economics. Every specialist in these areas of study will no doubt find soft spots in the material he marshals. But he has not been intimidated by the specialists, and luckily so, for he has given us a serious and intense intellectual summons to shape the future in new ways. In short, Ferkiss's proposal is worthy of extensive discussion and debate.

While not having a simplistic view of the relation between ideas and history, Ferkiss *does* lay much of the blame for our current plight at the feet of liberalism. By "liberalism" he means the classic liberalism of John Locke and the American Constitution. This liberalism gives ideological undergirding to about all the practices that are wrong with the modern industrial world. It has blindly believed the dogma of increase—that the growths of production and consumption are the ends of life. It has elevated individualism and an aggrandizing style of life. The values are placed by liberalism in the context of competitive struggle, both individual and corporate. The end of this, especially since the individual competitive impulses have been magnified a thousandfold by corporate technological might, is a rapacious *vandalism* in relation to the earth and its resources. Liberalism is the "vandal ideology."

Moreover, liberalism, though setting free powerful centrifugal thrusts, has no notion of the common good that can order these chaotic tendencies. Thus, it cannot and will not control the explosive technologies of the modern world. Liberalism has led to the near destruction of the natural and social environments. We must repent and begin anew.

Ferkiss believes that reform liberalism, socialism, and conservatism are all roads to nowhere: "The root failure of liberalism, and of conservatism and socialism as well, is that they restrict the concern of political philosophy to power relationships among people. They are inherently incapable of taking note of the fact that we have entered a new stage of development in which humanity's collective relationship to nature and to technology will determine our future destiny" (p. 7).

With this unequivocal rejection of the main options in political philosophy, Ferkiss begins the construction of his own "new" political philosophy, "ecological humanism."

Epistemologically, scientific reason is the instrument of the political philosophy of the future. Scientific reason can uncover the "objective nature of the universe" (p. 90). The patterns in the world of nature itself become for Ferkiss the main principles for shaping the new society. Ferkiss therefore argues that there can be no dualism between fact and value, mind and matter. The principles themselves, elaborated in detail in his *Technological Man*, are naturalism, holism, and immanentism. He fleshes these principles out in this book by outlining them in terms of human needs and the common good. Universal human needs, continuous with needs evident in the animal world but emerging in human form from it, are security, self-esteem, and variety. Following from these, the common good of any society can be constituted by provisions for subsistence, order, and purpose. Since this development of the political philosophy of ecological humanism is the central task of the book, Ferkiss naturally spells out in detail what has only been alluded to above. His execution of this task, I believe, is the most impressive and provocative part of the book.

Ferkiss is clear that a political philosophy in itself will not suffice. He argues for the primacy of politics as the only realistic instrument for setting policy that will incarnate ecological humanism. He thereby separates himself from approaches that naively expect a mysterious "greening" of America. The political strategy he recommends locates policy decisions in a strong center of governmental leadership and policy execution in decentralized and localized centers around the country. There must be an increase in what he calls "political intelligence" so that the government can assess the impact of technology on society more accurately. A new kind of "normative" planning must be instituted which will avoid the reactive nature of our present system.

Economics must be subordinated to politics in the necessary utopia ahead, and they must aim at balance, not growth. Cultural pluralism should be encouraged and even enhanced by allowing cultural and ethnic groups to live in self-chosen enclaves where they can express their life-styles more freely.

The future shaped by these strategies will be emergent, not eschatological. The revolution of ecological humanism will not be violent or wrenching; it will be an "immanent" or "convergent" revolution: "The triumph of ecological humanism, if humanity is to prevail, will have to be this kind of piecemeal, incremental process of creeping, convergent revolution. . . . It will be a process of social learning—of self-conscious evolution of society toward a new

form. Ecological revolution will be a conscious struggle, somewhat like a guerrilla war, the kind of process the New Left German student leader Rudi Dutschke spoke of in a metaphor based on the Chinese Communist experience as 'the long march through all the institutions of society' " (p. 269). The outward institutional forms of our society may not change radically, but Ferkiss's revolution will alter completely the principles, goals, and substance of those structures. The dying husk of liberalism will be replaced by a political philosophy more in harmony with the authentic needs of man in nature. As America lays hold of this view of the world, it will have increasingly beneficent effect for planetary society, which is now direly threatened by runaway liberalism.

The above summary, while stating the scope and program of the book, does not indicate the wealth of evidence and argumentation that is included. But it should give a hint of the seriousness and grandeur of the project. The main specific contributions, at least for me, are Ferkiss's reflections on the meaning of freedom in a technological age and his elaboration of the content of the common good. Going beyond liberalism's tendency to define freedom as the absence of limitation, Ferkiss sees it more as our ability to choose what limitations we really want: "We become free by consciously choosing how we will relate to our physical and social surroundings so as to affect the total future state of the systems of which we are an integral part" (p. 164).

The common good cannot be expected to emerge from the interplay of private interest because the real interest of the future is not really represented in that interplay. The interests of our natural habitat, of our needs for a common culture, and of our need to be free from impersonal, technological determination are not represented by the gigantic corporations that shape our destiny. The common good must be consciously chosen through political means. And Ferkiss gives us a fine glimpse of what the content of that common good indeed is.

Such a serious and grand endeavor, of course, must have flaws. I believe the most irksome problem is his treatment of liberalism. It smacks too much of a monocausal view of history with liberalism coming out as the "baddie" of history. If we could just get rid of that evil philosophy, Ferkiss seems to be saying, the major source of mankind's woes would disappear. Ferkiss is so intent on discrediting John Locke that he falls into serious errors. First, he tends to collapse Hobbes and Locke into the same camp when there are serious differences in their political philosophies. Leviathan was not exactly a representative democracy. Second, he tends to judge Locke by present standards and conditions. He chides Locke and liberalism constantly for believing that an ever-increasing economic pie would be beneficial. In Locke's time, however, such a belief was not so stupid. He believes Locke was so insensitive to the natural world that "in Locke's ideal world there would be billboards on the sides of the Grand Canyon" (p. 29).

He does the same thing to the heroes of American history. Jefferson laid the foundation for the military-industrial complex and the Vietnam war by stretching presidential authority (p. 36). Establishing that kind of link is more preposterous than the preposterous effort to hold Luther responsible for Hitler. John Adams, in Ferkiss's view, was only interested in material happiness. "Slavery was a necessary byproduct of liberalism" (p. 37). The "Founding Godfathers" all believed that "government exists to secure, indeed to enhance, these differences [in wealth]" (p. 34). There are many more exam-

ples of this exaggerated and inaccurate appraisal of historical and contemporary figures. Walter Lippman, of all people, takes his undeserved lumps as an enemy of the common good (p. 83).

I know we have to exaggerate our argument to make a point, but the simplism in Ferkiss's treatment of liberalism and American society rounds off too many edges. The United States is no ideal-type model of liberalism, just as it is not an ideal typification of capitalism. If Ferkiss were more accurate in his assessment of the mixed bag of American thought and history, perhaps his philosophy would not look so decisively "new."

If this first objection is more irritating than profound, the second problem I would point to is more serious. I believe Ferkiss has misinterpreted the nature of the problem that faces us. He makes a large case for the necessity that a more relevant political philosophy deal not only with people-to-people relations but with people-to-nature and people-to-technology relations (p. 7). If persons in political positions could see our problems as dimensions of the humanity-nature or humanity-technology crisis, their decisions would be wiser and better. Priorities would be clear. But is there really any purely people-to-nature relation or a people-to-technology relation? Is it not rather the case that people—particularly groups of people—own and control the use of natural resources? That people—particularly groups of people—invent, own, and control our technology? Nature and technology have no agency of their own, at least no direct agency. Politics must still deal with interest groups, not directly with nature or technology. And those interest groups, regardless of how persuasive the tenets of ecological humanism are, will rationalize their interest as being necessary to the common good.

Thus, the politics of the necessary utopia may look surprisingly like the old politics of struggle and balance. This is difficult to accept for one who, like Ferkiss, holds that scientific reason gives us clear ideas of the good, that reason leads to virtue, and that reason and virtue are both increasing in the modern world (chap. 10). (Why does liberalism hold on so long, I ask?) His overly idealistic notion that scientific reason is so unambiguous and therefore so morally and politically potent leads him to play down the role of compromise (p. 58), to collapse ethics into politics (pp. 153–54), to make claims that his is a movement that "speaks on behalf of interests common to all human beings" (p. 273), and to give to the government whatever power it must have to deal with the current crisis (p. 229). It is difficult to tell whether such tendencies stem from his optimism about the basic rationality and goodness of man or from his sensitivity to the gravity of the current crisis. In either case, the tendencies deserve to be criticized.

So, unfortunately, the old politics of balance and struggle will be with us. We cannot wish away the fact that problems of technology and of nature are also people problems—even if we are ecological humanists. But this is not to reject Ferkiss's efforts at defining and reaching for the common good. We need such efforts badly. But Ferkiss does short circuit the arduous quest for solving the dilemma of freedom and control by his optimism concerning the persuasiveness of scientific reason.

Be that as it may, perhaps Ferkiss is right about the crisis of liberal American society. Perhaps this is the *kairos* in which a whole new set of axial principles are emerging which will shape the future in ways far beyond our present imagination. If this is the *kairos*, then Ferkiss presents a highly persuasive and stirring portrayal of the philosophy that will ensure a human

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world. Anyone who can end a book in the following manner deserves a serious hearing:

The straggling army of the human cause lifts its ragged banners yet again, regroupes its broken legions, and prepares for its final battles to preserve its patrimony and keep the stargate open, serene in the knowledge that whatever the future holds, to be human means to keep faith with the cosmic processes which made man. The partisans of humanity know in their bones that in a world where doom portends, resistance and life are identical, and the odds against the survival of human existence can hardly be greater than those against its creation. They sing to themselves as they go about their tasks—merging their silent song with that of every buried seed struggling toward the sun and of the earth as it spins around its star. [P. 293]

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