

The natural diagnosis

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Forces of Change: Why We Are the Way We Are Now. By Henry Hobhouse *Sidgwick and Jackson: 1989. Pp. 264. £17.95.*

IN HIS best-selling *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Paul Kennedy offered a historian's reading of 'why we are the way we are now'. The global dynamics of East and West, of First, Second and Third Worlds, depend in the short run upon military strike power, but fundamentally upon political will and industrial strength. The world's future hangs upon super-power rivalry.

In *Forces of Change*, Henry Hobhouse offers a second opinion upon our problems and prospects. His diagnosis diverges radically. Mankind's true destiny, he argues, may have little to do with such strategic rivalries — he barely conceals his contempt for politicians and all the politicians' men. Rather, the true dynamics of history — too often ignored by blinkered historians — are biological and ecological. Spain conquered the Indies not by superior fire- or faith-power, but because it had smallpox on its side. The United States became the world's top dog not because of democracy and freedom, but because of infinite natural resources, above all, fertile land. The 'forces of change' are, at root, biological.

The natural history of man, he contends, results from a triangle of forces: population growth, food output, and disease. Around 1800, the pioneer demographer, Thomas Malthus, argued that progress was an impossibility, because man's propensity to breed would always outrun food supply: famine, pestilence or war would inevitably ensue. Have we at last succeeded in escaping these malthusian 'checks'? That is the question.

Superficially, at least, the answer might seem to be yes. Medicine is disarming disease. By consequence, global population has doubled twice this century and will do so again before 2030. War has barely culled these numbers, and only local, not global, famine has intervened. This is because food yields continue to rise phenomenally where efficient husbandry, science and technology, pesticides and the 'green revolution' have been shrewdly used. Future biotechnological prospects look rosy.

So is Malthus defeated? Hobhouse's answer — in a book by turns angry and witty — is basically no. Certainly, we can multiply population, but on most continents all we do is multiply misery, as peasant subsistence farming disintegrates

and the despairing masses flock to nightmare cities. Malthusian checks themselves may well have the last laugh with AIDS. And, of course, so-called progress is precipitating a new range of checks unknown to Malthus — the greenhouse effect, acid rain and the destruction of the ozone layer. Recognized all too late in the day, environmental pollution is perhaps already irreversible.

So far, so familiar. Hobhouse argues his brief with energy, combining historical vision with an expert grasp of agricultural business; but the basic analysis (condition chronic, possibly terminal) is hardly news. What rescues this diagnosis from the commonplace is its plain-man's trenchant realism, dismissive of pieties, platitudes and pie-in-the-sky.

Almost without exception, planners' attempts to cure by *diktat* the problems of population and hunger have proved counter-productive. From Stalin's Russia to Ethiopia, state socialism has been an eco-disaster. Hobhouse shows no more sympathy for high-minded movements like Greenpeace (sentimental, self-indulgent hot air), or international aid agencies, which palliate today's problems only to worsen tomorrow's. Native ways were wiser than Western do-gooding: better to have infanticide and high perinatal mortality on the savannah than surplus millions rotting in refugee camps. At least such folkways weeded out the 'unfit'.

And here, in this tell-tale term, harking back to social darwinism, we have the clue to Hobhouse's own nostrums. Like all other creatures, humans flourish when their habits 'fit' a particular environmental niche. The neo-Europes, New Zealand above all, have achieved a healthy 'fit' between human demands and natural resources. Japan's success is due more to its super-efficient land husbandry than to technological wizardry. In other words, Hobhouse sets store by a kind of territorial imperative: every population must carve out its own *modus vivendi* with nature, and then protect that survival strategy.

This requires a healthy individualism. Paternalism and egalitarianism are out in Hobhouse's tough-minded neo-darwinism: the idea of free health care at the point of service is a nonsense, he asides. We mistakenly look to leaders for magical answers, he says. Vest (some) faith in science, but none in politicians, for know-all, vote-seeking governments generally turn out to be environmental hazards.

Hobhouse's commitment to nature's



Sweet as honey — a mesolithic rock painting (7,000–4,000 BC) from Cuevas de la Araña, Bicorp, Spain, depicting a woman with a basket gathering wild honey from a hive at the top of a tree. The picture is taken from *Women in Prehistory* by Margaret Ehrenberg, published by the British Museum.

laws, to knowledge and enterprise, and his hatred of humbug has an attractive ring — as, of course, had Victorian social darwinism. But, for all its trumpeted 'realism', it has its own fatal blind-spot. For in the modern world you cannot divorce nature from politics. It is all very well to assert that the real problem of South Africa is not apartheid but the Bantu population explosion and consequent agricultural under-capitalization; but it takes a certain wilful myopia to treat these as unconnected. Trust to enterprise, Hobhouse urges, and you minimize waste. Maybe. But maybe you also end up, as he himself admits, with Thatcher's Britain disgorging vast quantities of untreated sewage and pollutants into the North Sea (and surely that is waste, by anybody's definition, not to say ecologically stupid).

It is disturbing to find a born-again darwinian convinced that enlightened competitive individualism will rectify today's ecological imbalances. For was it not these very 'forces of change' that first created the problems? Yet in these paradoxes lies the genuine stimulus of Hobhouse's spiky and often opinionated analysis. By tilting at conventional wisdoms, he forces us to think hard and deep about our true relationship with our planet. □

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