

A Prolegomenon to any Planning for the Future

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Brian Medlin (1927–2004) was the Foundation Professor of Philosophy
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Introductory Remarks

I'd like to start by paying tribute to Brian. Brian was a man of many talents, and prime amongst these was his shrewd philosophical ability. He was no "ivory tower" philosopher, however: he was passionate about what he believed in, and he had the integrity to put his philosophical beliefs into practice. In Adelaide, for example, he spearheaded the anti-war movement in the Vietnam era. Indeed, there is the famous photograph of him on the front page of the *Advertiser*, one day in September 1970, being forcibly arrested at an anti-war rally. As one might surmise from this, Brian's views were on the political left. During his days at Flinders University, the Philosophy Department there became the most committed Marxist Department in Australia. And in his later years, he came to see the importance of Environmentalism to the left, and of the left to Environmentalism. For all these things I admire him.

And now a few comments about where I am coming from in this lecture. For those of us on the political left, the collapse of Stalinism in Europe was both exhilarating and demoralizing. It was exhilarating because Stalinism was a perversion of Marxism, which had succeeded in giving it a thoroughly bad name. Yet, while it was there, it gave hope: it served to show that capitalism was not inevitable, and that alternatives to it were indeed possible. With the collapse of Stalinism, and the consequent hegemony of capitalism (to which even China has now succumbed), this is no longer the case. The political left has been cast into the wilderness. It is clear that new ideas are needed, and that new thinking is required to develop viable alternatives to capitalism. But little progress has been made on the issue. This is due, in part, to the difficulty of an articulation that is not utopian, in the Marxist sense. It is no good figuring out what an ideal society would be like; what needs to be done is figuring out how to change *this* society to a more enlightened one. What follows is a small contribution to this project – though I warn that it is a rather pessimistic one.

A final preliminary comment. I was at an art gallery in Kyoto earlier this year. There was an exhibition of German poster art from about the first thirty years of the 20th century. The posters from the first decade of the century were full of optimism, displaying new ideas, products, forms of art. As the decades roll on, the posters reflected the harsh realities of the 20th century: the first world war, inflation, depression, the rise of Nazism. There the historical period of the exhibition came to an end. But we all know what came later. I was struck by the thought that the people in the first 10 years of the last century had absolutely no conception of the traumas and horrors through which they were going to live (The thought was grimly reinforced by a visit to Hiroshima a few months later). We are in the same position with respect to this century. The pace of change is accelerating, and there is no doubt that things will change a lot more in this century than in the last. Doubtless, much of what happens in the process will be just as horrible and traumatic as events in the last century, if not more so. But our ignorance is just as great as that of our predecessors 100 years ago.

Part 1: the Looming Catastrophe

So let us get down to business. It is clear that an environmental catastrophe is looming, caused by global warming. Pundits disagree about exactly how close it is, and about what its precise effects will be. Even if we knew exactly how much global temperatures were going to rise (which of course we don't) our models of the effects on the earth, its climates, ecologies, and so on, are very crude. Worse, changes may well not be gradual. Quite plausibly, the systems in question are catastrophic, in the technical sense: there can be sudden and irreversible changes.

But that caveat aside, things are obviously not looking good. Even maintenance of the *status quo* will result in erratic weather conditions and droughts – major disruptions to food production; and rising sea-levels – resulting in population shifts (Remember how much of the world's population lives close to sea level).

But the reality is likely to be worse. The political will for change, if it is to have any real effect, has to be global, and it is not there. Even if the US changed its policy to zero-increase immediately (which is not going to happen), China and India are not going to do so until they have caught up with the Western world in industrial development. The increasing capitalization required to raise the living standards means greater energy-consumption and heat production. Moreover, if and when cuts are eventually made, temperatures will still rise for some time, due to hysteresis.

Even if I am wrong about this, there are reasons to suppose that the capitalist system, which – pace Marx – shows no signs of self-dismantling, will produce an

ecological catastrophe anyway. I will return to this in the third part of the talk.

It seems certain, then, that we are facing dramatic ecological disruption some time this century. The effects of this, though hard to predict, are likely to include:

- The destruction of major agricultural areas
- Major redistribution of populations away from current coastal areas
- The consequent destruction of capital resources in urban and agricultural areas

The result of this *is* predictable. There will be increasing and intensified competition for resources: food, clean water, primary resources, and markets – especially in a context where China and India will be increasingly competing with North America, Europe – and each other. The consequences of this, again, are likely to be military conflict, and probably outright wars. These, in turn, will lead to further capital destruction, environmental destruction, and degradation of resources. This will produce increased competition, leading to further conflict, and so on... A vicious circle; or, more aptly, a viciously descending spiral.

Of course, this could all be avoided by radical measures:

- The installation of a world government
- The redistribution of the world's resources more evenly across its peoples
- Putting a halt to a form of economic production whose rationale is “growth”

But this clearly is utopian wishfulness.

It therefore seems likely that we will witness global ecological and social catastrophe resulting in and from the unleashing of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Pestilence, Famine, War, and Death). How bad this will be remains to be seen. A worst case scenario is obviously a full scale nuclear war, and the destruction of sentient life. Clearly, for the purpose of social planning, we must assume that, though it will be bad, it will not be that bad: there is nothing to plan for in such a scenario.

Part 2: Consequences for Social Planning

So it would appear that we must assume that there will be a catastrophe, but that it will not be the end of sentient life. If so, what we should be planning for is life after the catastrophe, and in particular, the social reconstruction that will be necessary. We should be putting our efforts here – the left in particular (I will come back to this).

Marx was coy about making plans for after the revolution. After the revolution, economic production would be different, and so people would think differently.

Since it was difficult to say how, exactly, it was difficult to plan. He therefore made only cursory and scattered remarks about life after the revolution. But planning for life after the catastrophe will, in any case, be quite different from planning for life after Marx' revolution. He envisaged a simple *transfer* of the means of production – and so, in particular, their preservation – from the hands of a minority to the hands of the majority. In the situation in which we now find ourselves, we have to envisage their substantial destruction.

What issues need to be addressed in the process of planning? All I can do here is to put a few thoughts on the table to open a discussion on the matter.

First, we will need to arrange for the preservation of knowledge. If things go badly, a major thing we risk losing is knowledge. We risk losing scientific and technical knowledge. Such knowledge is obviously necessary for recreating the means of production: food needs to be grown and processed; sick people need to be tended and healed; and so on. But we also risk losing social and cultural knowledge. The preservation of this is also necessary – not least because we need to understand how we got into the mess we are in, so that we don't get into it again. Moreover, the knowledge needs to be stored in a robust form. This means that it should be stored in multiple locations; for many locations may be lost. It also means that the material should be stored not just in electronic form. Not only can electronic data be destroyed all too easily; in a really bad scenario, we might not even have the means to retrieve electronic data.

Next, we need to think about the germ of a new socio-political structure. Such a structure should be global: we will all be in need. It should be cooperative: we will all need each other. And it should be primed to function if and when existing structures are starting to break down, or have broken down. At the very least, there needs to be a global network of people, who are aware of the situation, and who are committed to functioning cooperatively (So, then, people need to be educated about matters).

We also need to think about how and when to activate the structure. This is a highly non-trivial issue when action may have to be taken in a situation where communication is problematic.

Furthermore, one should hardly expect such planning to be popular. It will be seen as running against the interests of particular groups, such as national governments and international capital. Since these are very powerful institutions, one can expect them to try to suppress such planning. How to deal with this needs to be considered.

Finally, the really hard question: we need to address the issue of what a global, sustainable, economic system should be like. This cannot be capitalism. For this is

not sustainable. Let us turn to consider this matter.

Part 3: Capitalism and Sustainability

Marx thought that capitalism was not sustainable. The ever-increasing pressure for profit (or to be more accurate, surplus value), would make the conditions of workers more and more unpleasant, until they decided that enough was enough, and take over. Clearly this has not happened – at least, not yet. Capitalism has shown a robustness that Marx did not anticipate. Exactly how it has achieved this is a debatable point. Arguably, the globalization of capital has played a large role in the matter. Not only has the widened market decreased the pressure for a time (the gas has a larger bottle, so the pressure is lower, as it were); but, crucially, the globalization has moved the proletariat essentially out of first-world countries into the third world, where expectations are lower, and, in any case, it is easier to control dissent. Conceivably a revolution of the kind that Marx envisaged could still happen, but it seems unlikely that it would happen before the looming environmental catastrophe (though the global near melt-down of the world's banking system towards the end of 2008 certainly gave cause for thought in this regard).

So when I say that capitalism is not sustainable, it is not this that I have in mind. Rather, the reason for the unsustainability is closer to that envisaged a generation before Marx by Thomas Malthus. Malthus argued that population growth is geometric – or exponential, as it is also called (thus if every couple has three children, the population goes up by 50% each generation), whilst the increase in resources – and particularly food-production is arithmetic (that is, it increases by a constant amount each generation). Exponential progressions grow much faster than arithmetic progressions; and so in due course, the population must outgrow the means to sustain it, leading to the unleashing of the Four Horsemen we have already met. For Malthus, only natural causes (e.g., accidents and old age), misery (wars, pestilence, plague, and above all, famine), and vice (which for him included infanticide, murder, contraception, and homosexuality) could check excessive population growth. Malthus favoured sexual restraint (which included late marriage and sexual abstinence) as a check on population growth – though only for the poor and working class (the rich, I suppose, still had vice).

Historically speaking, Malthus has been just as wrong as Marx. Food production has grown at a rate much greater than arithmetic. The reason why, though, is worth noting. The increased productivity has been brought about by mechanization and, crucially, the increasingly intensive use of fertilization. And these form part of the current problem. Many fertilizers emit green-house gasses and, heavily used, give rise to salination and land degradation; and both the production of fertilizers and mechanization depend heavily on the petro-chemical industry, a primary source of global warming. That Malthus' predications have not been realized to date is,

therefore, somewhat cold comfort in the present context.

Still, even though Malthus was wrong, his view contained an important insight: resource availability is bounded. In particular, then, exponential increase of resource demand is bound, sooner or later, to come into conflict with this bound. To see why this fact is crucial in the present context we have to return to Marx.

Capitalism is driven by the need to generate profit. It requires constant economic growth, so that a surplus can be produced, to be reinvested to make more profit, to be reinvested to make more profit, to be reinvested... (We know how everything falls apart when an economy goes into recession). The growth requires greater and greater exploitation of the world's natural and human resources. And the world's resources are finite and very limited. True, this was never a factor for Marx, enmeshed as he was in the period of Victorian industrial optimism. But we are now painfully aware of it. Capital expansion is bound, therefore, sooner or later, to hit the wall, producing the sort of catastrophe we now face. This is why I said earlier that even if I am wrong about the current effects of global warming, capitalism is bound to produce an ecological catastrophe sooner or later. Global warming is the form of the problem in which we now face it; but if it weren't that, it would eventually be something else.

And it is worth remembering how fast the wall is hit in an exponential progression. Suppose that at midnight we have a jar containing one amoeba. Every second, each amoeba in the jar divides to produce two amoebas – so that at every second the size of the population of amoebas doubles – until, at noon the next day, the jar is full. At what time is the jar half-full? One second before noon.

At any rate, we see why a sustainable economy – one that will not produce, or reproduce, the current grim situation – will not be capitalism.

Part 4: Humanity and Rationality

That does not, of course, determine what it will be like. But while we are at it, we should take the opportunity to plan that the new system is not only sustainable, but rational and humane. In particular, the economic system must work for the benefit of people, and not, as in capitalism, the other way around.

The very rationale of capitalism is the production of profit. This certainly benefits people sometimes – or some people sometimes – but the benefits are distributed very unevenly. The rich, of course, have it better than the poor; and whether or not you are rich depends very much on the country in which you were born, and the conditions under which you were born. We face the absurdity that there is easily enough wealth in the world to eliminate poverty, starvation, and provide a decent

level of health care for all. Yet much of this wealth is not only wasted; it is centralized in the hands of a global few. That is, indeed, a feature of capitalism, since capital tends to agglomerate capital to itself. Moreover, to maximize profit, capitalism is wont to be as stingy as possible with most people's living conditions. Not only this, unemployment is a structural feature of capitalism. It keeps down the cost of labour, as well as maintaining a "reserve army" of labour for the periods when the trade cycle is in expansion. The unemployed, who are often unemployed through no fault of their own, tend not only to be poor, but suffer the psychological traumas of being put on society's scrap heap. Even worse, the labour of the unemployed could obviously produce things of social value. But because no one can use it to make a profit, this labour is not realised. Finally, even those people in employment, whether they are rich or poor, are conditioned by an economic system that privileges the simple acquisition of wealth; the capitalist advertising system produces desires that cannot be fulfilled; and people lose sight of the fact that the real things that give life value are not money. As I said, the present system is neither rational nor humane.

As an aside, we have now become so used to thinking of things in terms of profit-generation, that even things that are clearly not of this kind, such as the health and education systems are conceptualised in these terms – and so deformed. Thus, in universities, funding a staff appointment is called an "investment", lecturers are evaluated simply in terms of the "money they make" (students taught, research grants obtained, etc.); if they do not "earn enough" they must "increase their productivity" or be expended by "downsizing"; students are a commodity, who "generate income"; education is a process of "value adding" to a commodity; and so on. This is all crazy. We have forgotten what education is all about: helping people to live a meaningful and fulfilling life. And, yes, that means having enough money to live. But that is an impoverishment of the goals of education of staggering proportion.

Anyway, and coming back to the main point: we need a system which works for the benefits of *people*, not profit. People are not to be sacrificed at the altar of Mammon; rather, wealth produced is to be used in a way which is conducive to human happiness. When thinking through the details of more sensible economic systems, we should think first of human flourishing, and then see how we can achieve one of these from where we are – or will be, after the catastrophe.

Conclusion: Gambling on the Future

I have no doubt that Brian would have agreed entirely with these points. In one of his articles on the environment he says, 'I assume that you believe with me that the whole planet is in crisis; that unless we correct our behaviour, human beings are unlikely to survive for much longer, while human civilization is almost certain

to perish'.¹ He was arguing 16 years ago, in a context where many people were not even persuaded that global warming was occurring, let alone that this was a disastrous development. He therefore argued that, even if the relevant evidence is not decisive, we should not wait till it is; by then it may well be too late. We should take steps to ensure that things do not get out of hand.

The argument is a simple decision-theoretic one. Even if something is improbable, if it is very bad, it is rational to take steps to guard against it now. This is why, for example, people take out insurance against their house being burned down.

Things have now moved on. 16 years later, nothing has been done to change the situation that Brian diagnosed, and it is now no longer in doubt that global warming and its effects are happening. Brian was hopeful that the catastrophe could be avoided if we all wake up; for reasons I have explained, I am not. If I am right, it is pretty much inevitable given our economic system (It is a striking fact that the few people who are still “global-warming skeptics,” come, for the most part, from the political right, and have an investment, emotional and/or financial, in the current economic system). But even if I am wrong, similar decision-theoretic reasoning still applies. Even if you take the probability of the sort of catastrophe I have envisaged to be low, we need to put in place measures to deal with it now, just because it is so catastrophic. It's like taking out fire insurance.

This does not mean that we should stop trying to prevent the catastrophe. People who take out fire insurance do not stop taking steps to minimise the risk of fire to their property. Just maybe, we can pull it off. And even if we are doomed to failure, maybe the efforts will mean that the catastrophe will not be as bad when it comes (and so will be easier to recover from). And maybe we can buy ourselves a little time by slowing things down.

But we must also be planning to pick ourselves up afterwards. About how to do this, I have done no more than put a few ideas on the table. I am sure that there are many more questions that need to be faced; and the answers are neither clear nor straightforward. But you cannot plan unless you understand the situation you are in. This talk has had a simple aim: to spell this out. It is nothing more than a very necessary prolegomenon to any planning for the future.

endnote

1. *Human Nature and Human Survival*, Board of Research, The Flinders University of South Australia, 1992, 21.