

# Sold Out to the Future

SOME PEOPLE look to their own consciences, their own ideas of right and wrong, before reaching decisions that govern their behavior about the future; others, in this secular age, make a god of "history" – the history of the future – and refer their decisions to its oracles. In the age of the "other-directed," or the "outer-directed," man, it is the latter group that gets the credit for common sense. Why, so this group asks, why kick against the pricks, why go down with the romantic "lost cause," why secede from the life of one's times, why fight against the wave of the future? "Leadership," in the minds of those who pose such rhetorical questions, consists of being just a little bit ahead of the other fellow in "cooperating with the inevitable."

The basic flaw in making "history" – the history of the future – into a god to whom decisions may be referred is that it assumes the attributes of the godhead can be known before they have revealed themselves. But everybody

knows, as a matter of common sense, that nobody can predict what will happen five or ten years hence. If the future is "inevitable" – as indeed it is after it has become the present – the individual is still faced with the necessity of outguessing it. If the individual is a man, if he has any confidence in the desires and imperatives of his own being, he will – "inevitably" – try to fashion the god of history in his own image. All of which leaves the human being right where he has always been: he is himself the potential creator of a small ripple of force. In his own small way he has a chance of becoming part of the historical god he is prepared to worship. To the extent that he insists on favoring the active as against the passive mood, the individual can hope to affect history. God, in this sense, is the sum total of our individual urges.

Assuming, purely for the sake of argument, that one can, like a spider, spin god out of one's own entrails, my own individual deistic "urge" tells me that Robert L.

Heilbroner's *The Future as History* (Harper, 217 pp., \$4.00) is a poor guess as to the nature of the historical godhead. The book talks portentously about the forces of science, technology, and popular aspirations to democracy and well-being among the have-not populations in the old colonial regions of the East and the tropical South. It assumes that the god of the historical future has frowned on capitalism; it assumes that central planning of national economies is the "condition" which all big enterprises must accept if they wish to avoid outright "nationalization" by government.

### **Socialism Presumed**

If collectivism is Heilbroner's wish for the historical godhead, it makes sense for him to construct his own particular object of worship out of his own socialistic extrapolations of certain currently observable trends. This is Heilbroner's way of trying to set his own seal on events. But to make his extrapolations stick, Heilbroner has to fall back on his own version of the mature economy theory. He has to assume that investment—the motor force making for continued growth in capitalism—must at some point fail beyond the hope of renewal.

Since the future has not happened as yet, I cannot prove that

Heilbroner's assumption is wrong. But I do know this: that every time the prophets have assumed that private investment in new capital goods has come to a dead end, those prophets have been proved fallacious. The "god" of history has always abandoned them.

John Stuart Mill, for example, once scratched his head in perplexity when he tried to envision a new "ladder" industry taking over after investment in textile machinery had run out. Since his crystal ball yielded him no premonitions of such things as automobiles, airplanes, and tractors, Mill was pessimistic about the motive power of capitalism a full century ago.

In the nineteen thirties in America, Rexford Tugwell surmised that our capital plant had assumed a more or less permanent form, and that henceforward our problem would be to distribute its "plenty" not only among those who were employed by it but also among those who had been disemployed by failure in the capital goods industries. If the god of history had taken Tugwell at his word, the world of electronics and automation would never have come into existence.

The discrediting of Tugwell as a prophet came some eighty years after the discrediting of Mill,

which ought to serve as a warning to those who think the inventive capacities of the human animal must eventually exhaust themselves. But Heilbroner refuses to heed the warning that is implicit in every variant action by every try-and-see individual who thinks he can improve on what is going on around him.

Simply because our military budget absorbs a hefty proportion of our taxes, Heilbroner assumes that government purchases are a necessary means of insuring full employment. Like Stuart Chase, he is worried about the economic impact of a possible agreement with Soviet Russia to stop producing expensive missiles, and he is full of "compensatory" schemes for redesigning our cities and remaking our river valleys.

### ***An Affluent Fantasy***

It does not occur to Mr. Heilbroner that if the average American family could keep some of the money it is now surrendering to the Department of Internal Revenue, the landscape might brighten without any "compensatory" government action. Far from having the "affluence" which Professor Galbraith attributes to them, most Americans at present are practicing an austerity that is tempered only by the willingness of consumer finance companies to extend

credit for certain long-term purchases. I don't know a soul that wouldn't paint his house or get rid of an antique car or send a son or daughter to a better school or take a more expensive vacation or move into a new neighborhood or try out a new hobby, if he or she could afford it.

Indeed, the canard that we are so choked with riches that Madison Avenue must whip us into buying is so obviously fallacious that one wonders where people like Galbraith and Heilbroner have mislaid their eyes. The truth is that our dollars must be stretched over such big distances that Madison Avenue is collectively at its wit's end to capture enough of them to keep up its own notions of the affluent life. While Detroit motor manufacturers fondly imagine that their chosen advertising agencies are selling the doctrine of "dynamic obsolescence" to the car buying public, the actual flesh-and-blood car owner keeps Detroit on an austere replacement ration of six million new automobiles a year. With sixty million cars on the road, this means that a car is not "obsolescent" until it has reached the tenth year of its life. There is nothing very "dynamic" about that. And there won't be any improvement in the situation until government stops taxing people into buying the smaller, cheaper, and

more perdurable "compact" vehicles that are demanded by the austerity standards of the cold war epoch.

Far from producing a depression, the end of military buying by the U.S. government might touch off a boom of incredible duration, once the transition to a true peace basis has been made. Indeed, while the U.S. and Soviet Russia have been putting their money into armaments, western Europe has been booming precisely because it has not been diverting its income into bigger and better missiles. Heilbroner refuses to draw any relevant deduction from this extremely obvious fact.

In addition to his fears that capitalism must founder on the investment problem, Heilbroner also worries over the possibility that the have-not nations will gang up on the haves if the West refuses to underwrite bigger and better socialistic Five Year Plans from the Ganges to the Congo. My own reading of "the future as history" tells me that unless the citizens of Soviet Russia and Red China can escape from their present institutional masters, they are due to experience bigger and better famines. Moreover, if India and the Congolese bind themselves to "the future as socialism," they, too, will have bigger and better failures. Just how this will endow them

with the strength to gang up on the West defies all logic.

If Mr. Heilbroner proves right about the possibility that the West may be on its last legs, it will be because we ourselves have gone over to the "planning" philosophy. By making ourselves slaves to government, we of the West will become have-not powers, too. And in a contest between have-nots, the more fecund Indians and Congolese might indeed take over. ◆

#### ▶ MAN IN MODERN FICTION

By Edmund Fuller (New York: Random House, 165 pp., \$3.50)

*Reviewed by Robert Thornton*

SOME THIRTY YEARS AGO Albert Jay Nock wrote an essay entitled *On Making Low People Interesting*. Referring to the characters of contemporary fiction he observed: "They were all so colorless, in fact, so unsubstantial for literary purposes, that the authors had to be continually helping them out, finding something for them to do, creating one striking situation after another, to keep them going." The "something for them to do," then as now, usually involved sex or mayhem. Mr. Nock's complaint was not that authors dealt with low people — "a great asset to an artist" — but that there was "no vestige of the art that creates a character interesting in itself, irrespective of plot and ro-