Beyond the Dependency Culture: People, Power and Responsibility

James Robertson, Twickenham, England: Adamantine Press Limited, 1998, 217pp.

James Robertson is a seasoned policy maker. More than three decades ago, from the corridors of Whitehall, he became the architect of the "winds of change" theme for British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's end-of-empire tour of Africa. Robertson's theme of change is a call for liberation, and more specifically, liberation from the control and domination of institutional power. He sees it fit to argue that in the post-imperial world, prosperity and survival of nations and peoples depends on a deep-rooted concern for humans and nature.

In the postmodern world where communism has breathed its last and socialism is in disrepute, Robertson has attempted to chart a new course for the future of humanity. He believes that both capitalism and socialism have served the motives of big businesses and state. It is time for a postmodern worldview to emerge that will rectify the excesses of the two dominant systems. The author calls for a new path of progress, based on co-operative self-reliance rather than increased dependency, so that the world allows people (and nations) to take responsibility for their own development in co-operation with one another. He sees this not only as an important end in itself, but also as "the only means, barring worldwide catastrophe, of transforming today's ecologically destructive patterns of human activity into ways of life that can be sustained into the future" (p. xi).

This theme constitutes the bulk of lectures and papers that are reprinted in the book. Spanning a period of nearly two decades — from 1977 to 1996 — they complement the author's earlier published works: *The Sane Alternative*

(1978), *Future Work* (1985) and *Future Wealth* (1990). The selections in this book focus on the industrialized societies of North America, Britain, and Europe.

The historic transition from dependency toward a "co-operative self-reliance" is discussed at length in the first two chapters of the book, and is touched upon again in chapter eight. Robertson's hypothesis is that "industrial society may develop towards the kind of post-industrial society in which people will be less, not more, dependent on money and jobs and public services." In his view, the term "post-industrial" can mean two different things: on one hand, it could refer to the marked acceleration of industrial-age trends and drives, and indicates the deepening of people's dependency on large organizations and high finance; and on the other, it could refer to an era which is more humane and ecological, and where progress becomes people-centered. According to Robertson, "the conflict between these two competing visions of post-industrial society can be seen ... as the motor force which is driving the post-modern evolution" (p. xvi).

In the course of transition to a post-industrial society, major reconceptualizations will occur. The two most important ones relate to work and wealth. In the context of work, the changing sense of purpose will largely determine the nature of work to be done, and it will be the individual's perception of the work rather than the collective attributes that will serve as engines of work. Similarly, the iconic value of wealth will come to change. New cars, TVs, and other acquired possessions will no longer be an acceptable criterion for being wealthy. On the contrary, such criterion will include having the necessary resources to harness energy for living as opposed to remaining dependent upon centralized energy distribution services.

These two parameters alone carry far-reaching implications for economic thinking and management. Indeed, if post-industrial society is to be people-centered, as argued by Robertson, then several economic givens must come under greater scrutiny. For instance, are there any essential limitations to formal economics? What are the criteria for validating concepts such as "resource allocation," "production," and "consumption" in an informal economy?

The ensuing conflict between the formal and the informal inevitably leads to questions of epistemological import. What Robertson has highlighted as the problems of definition by formal economics may equally apply to other areas of common discourse: domination and liberation, rigidity and creativity, and old structures versus new aspirations. In this context, the author refers to Willis Harman's recent book, *An Incomplete Guide to the Future*, in which Harman distinguishes between scientific knowledge which is based on rational and empirical processes, and intuitive knowledge which is essentially an uncon-

scious process based on identification with the "other". Although both fields have difficulties in proving their universal and unchanging validity, he stresses the need to recognize their necessary combination, which has brought scientists to examine the limitations of factual knowledge, and how intuitive knowledge could be shared and validated.

It is amazing that Robertson advances his argument not at the strength of verifiable scientific data but for the role of faith in determining human behavior. For instance, the opening of the second chapter titled "A Post-Marxist Strategy for the Post-Industrial Revolution" has the following quotation from Roger Garaudy's book, *The Alternative Future*:

> At the genesis of all revolutionary action lies an act of faith: the certainty that the world can be transformed, that man has the power to create something new, and that each of us is personally responsible for this transformation. (p. 23)

For Robertson, the act of faith necessary to bring the nonviolent revolutionary post-industrial society to reality revolves around psychological and social rather than technical and economic frontiers. In other words, the author is making an important distinction between all that is quantitative and qualitative. This surely is in line with his earlier reference to intuitive versus scientific knowledge and the role of faith in human knowing. He envisages the post-industrial revolution as a means to break out of the psychological and social limits just as the industrial revolution enabled us to remove the physical and technical constraints. Obviously, the author is making an admission that industrial progress has been made at the expense of human psychology and sociology.

In delineating the impending revolution, the author argues that post-industrial society will involve a change of direction, and not an acceleration of industrial trends. According to Robertson, the foreseeable changes of direction will be the following: from economic growth to human growth; from polarization of sex roles in society to a new balance between them; from increasing specialization to increasing self-sufficiency; from increasing dependence on big organizations and professional know-how to increasing self-reliance; from increasing urbanization to a more dispersed pattern of habitation; from increasing centralization to more decentralization of power; from increasing dependence on polluting technologies that waste resources and dominate people who work with them to increasing emphasis on technologies appropriate to the environment, to the availability of resources, and to the needs of people; and from increasing emphasis on rationality and the left side of the brain to increasing emphasis on intuition and the right side of the brain.

In essence, the post-industrial revolution is a change of direction from material growth to personal and social growth. Undoubtedly this is a major paradigm shift just like the Industrial Revolution, which gave humans a new direction two hundred years ago. How will a change of this magnitude come about? In answering this question, Robertson makes certain comparisons and draws upon lessons from the industrial revolution itself. First, it should be noted that the Industrial Revolution did not come as a result of state activity but through the cumulative efforts of people who engaged in new enterprises and took economic initiatives. In the case of the post-industrial revolution, the same human spirit will bring the change in direction but from a personal, social, and psychological perspective. Second, a breakdown in the industrialized way of life will necessarily allow a breakthrough of the post-industrial lifestyle. According to Robertson:

> We can speed up the breakthrough by helping to liberate ourselves from too much dependence: on employers for our work; on business corporations for our food and the other goods we need; on the medical profession and the drug companies for our health; on the educational profession and educational institutions for our learning ... A very wide range of activity is opening up here in alternative economics, alternative technology, alternative health, alternative education, alternative politics ... and many others. (p. 29)

In a largely eurocentric frame of reference, Robertson has effectively presented the case for an alternative future; however, it is regrettable that the theme is limited to only three chapters of the book while the other thirteen chapters deal with subjects as diverse as nuclear power and "horseshit" economics. This is unfortunate, as the author could have more usefully expanded on the alternative theme rather than going into a disparate discourse, especially as such diversions leave the reader with a lot of unanswered questions about the alternative future. More so since we are in the wake of an increasingly globalized world.

Munawar A. Anees
Knowledge Management Systems (KnowSys)
Tucson, Arizona