

THE INNER LIMITS OF MANKIND: HERETICAL REFLECTIONS ON TODAY'S VALUES, CULTURE AND POLITICS

Author: Ervin Laszlo

Published by: OneWorld Publications, Oxford, 1989, 146 pages

The limits to material growth, the "outer limits" of the planet, are subjects of great current interest. Ozone depletion, population crisis, and energy policy are only a few of the many vexing questions that face this generation. But while the champions of the earth grow in number and clamor, other enlightened voices threaten to be drowned out. Arable acres and birth rates are important, but does their control hold the key to the planet's future?

Ervin Laszlo says they don't. In the face of "green fashion," Laszlo has become a self-proclaimed heretic. He suggests that inner limits—values, vision, and postures—are more important and fundamental than are limited resources. "It is not the finitude of the planet, but the bounds of human will and understanding that obstruct our evolution towards a better future" (14). Laszlo's central thesis is that human beings, not the limits of nature, are the cause of the world's problems, and only by redesigning our thoughts and actions, not the world around us, can we solve these problems.

Laszlo traces the origins of these ideas to his research in preparation of a report for the Club of Rome.¹ "I was motivated not only by reason, but also by feeling—the strongly felt belief that we were attacking the wrong issues, that we were missing out on opportunities that will not recur, and that now is the time to speak out clearly and strongly" (13). Although written with intellectual sophistication, this book is not intended solely for an academic audience. Rather, Laszlo writes as an intensely concerned man, deeply troubled by the refractoriness of world leaders and their constituents to changes in attitude. The product of his reflections is a small but compelling treatise divided into six sections and an appendix.

At the outset Laszlo warns the reader that his reflections may be "cutting and critical"; he captures the choice currently facing humanity with a simple juxtaposition, "a future of distinction, or a future of extinction" (17). A colorful and incisive style is the rapier with which he attacks "obsolete and dangerous" doctrines in the second chapter, entitled "Personal Limits: The Unrecognized Obsolescence of Modernism." For example, he roundly criticizes unfettered free-market principles that reduce human beings to some "robot-like *homo economicus*." In a reference to Adam Smith and the Chicago School of Economics, Laszlo sardonically writes, "The 'invisible hand' of the past now turns into an invisible foot which kicks the powerless without mercy. Wealth, instead of trickling down, remains neatly absorbed above" (41). Like Reinhold

1. Ervin Laszlo et al., *Goals for Mankind: A Report to the Club of Rome on the New Horizons of Global Community* (New York: Dutton, 1977).

Wagnleitner, he refers to the process of cultural imperialism as the "Coca-colonization" of the world and summarizes its ethos: materialism, egoism, chauvinism, and atheism. He shows equal disdain for rugged individualism, social Darwinism, consumerism, nationalism, and other corollaries of "modernism." In short, Laszlo believes the personal and collective values of the modern age have created a social order that is simply out of order.

But Laszlo's is not an atavistic call for a simpler, purer epoch. Just as a boiled egg cannot be uncooked, modernism, he argues, cannot be reversed (although it may be surpassed). The values for a global age, he suggests, are slowly emerging from the present decay. Interdependence, diversity, reciprocity, and international solidarity must underlie global affairs, while individuals should adopt moderate, gentle lifestyles. To go beyond modernism, humanity sorely needs positive images of the future, visions that have atrophied under the influence of pragmatism and pernicious pessimism. Laszlo offers the great religious and ethical traditions as sinews of positive vision.

Part four of the book is called "Political Limits: The Crisis of International Political Will." Laszlo begins this chapter by referring to U Thant's comment that global partnership is the only way to overcome the "world problematique" presented by security, food, energy, economic, development, and environmental issues. He considers these problems, in turn, and although their causes are complex and numerous, he identifies the common obstacle preventing their resolution as a deeply entrenched but hopelessly outdated system of national sovereignty. A hamstrung United Nations reflects the paralysis of international political will. The chapter's conclusion, reminiscent of the writings of the late Jean Monnet, is that the world must be properly organized around the formation of large, effective entities which allow the discussion of problems inside common institutions.

The book's fifth section, "Transcending the Inner Limits," briefly sets out the author's individual and social "ground rules for a world to be" (101). The sixth chapter is called "Beyond Today's Limits: The Evolutionary Prospect." The influence of the Bahá'í teachings on Laszlo's thinking is most pronounced in these final chapters.

Laszlo describes an ideal world society as one that will allow "the creativity of cultures and the ingenuity of peoples full play . . . a world that is diverse yet harmonious, progressive yet sustainable, free yet disciplined" (115). For Bahá'í readers, this passage could have been cut from the same cloth as *The Promise of World Peace*, a statement by the Universal House of Justice.²

2. See, "To the Peoples of the World: A Bahá'í Statement on Peace" *Bahá'í Studies* 14 (Association for Bahá'í Studies: Ottawa, 1986), which describes "a social system at once progressive and peaceful, dynamic and harmonious, a system giving free play to individual creativity and initiative but based on co-operation and reciprocity" (3).

(According to Mr. 'Alí Nakhjavání, Laszlo was the first to acknowledge and write an appreciation of this statement.³)

Laszlo asserts that recent scientific insights have offered an outline of history and evolution convergent with the Bahá'í view of the emergence of planetary civilization.⁴ He predicts that the principle of "unity with diversity" (127) will pervade global society. Although he does not name it, Laszlo describes an organizational structure akin to the Bahá'í Administrative Order, toward which humanity is being both pushed and pulled. It is a world system that will "operate on multiple levels of organization, ranging from the grass-roots level of villages . . . all the way to the global level. Each level will be coordinated with all the others, with information flowing among the units horizontally, as well as vertically between the different levels" (126-27). Laszlo's trenchant predictions are significant footnotes to a history of the future.

A small book of such panoramic scope is unavoidably limited by a few overgeneralizations, and perhaps the text contains an excess of rhetorical questions. But at the end, the reader is left with the overwhelming impression of Ervin Laszlo's prescience. He successfully argues his central theme: outer limits are symptoms only, determined largely by humanity's inner limits of will, vision, and belief. He believes the odds favor the emergence of an enlightened Global Age, but the thoughts and actions of this generation will be crucial. These heretical reflections add to the fifty books and more than 250 published articles in which Ervin Laszlo has already shared his learning. Heresy has rarely been wiser.

JOHN N. DANESH

3. Address by Universal House of Justice member 'Alí Nakhjavání, at the Association for Bahá'í Studies 11th Annual Conference, London, Ontario, August 1986, recorded by Images International, Belchertown, Massachusetts.

4. See also Ervin Laszlo, "Humankind's Path to Peace in Global Society," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 2.2 (1989): 19-37.