

Liberty

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Booknotes

Enemies of the Stasis —

Virginia Postrel's excellent *The Future and Its Enemies* (Free Press, 1998, 265 pages) details the many ways in which the forces of dynamism conflict with the forces of stasis. The book is an excellent journalistic treatment of the pervasiveness of these opposing perspectives throughout our society. The title clarifies the very real risk that the stasis forces may prevail, that the world may well reject progress and stagnate. Indeed, for most of human history that has been the story. Postrel ends her book detailing the tragedy of China, which sank from world leader to backwater country in a few centuries as the stultifying forces of bureaucracy gained ascendancy. Implicitly the book suggests that this fate might await America.

But one is left at the end of the book with a feeling of "Now what?" How has it happened that America — the "Can Do" nation of almost naive optimism — has become so pessimistic? Why is it that so many in America — especially among the intellectual classes — shifted so decisively toward the forces of stasis? Knowing that progress is threatened is useful; knowing why this threat has grown in recent decades would be far more so. And here *The Future and Its Enemies* is strangely silent.

Let me suggest a possible cause, specifically the popularity of Malthusianism — the Terrible Too's belief that there are too many of us, that we consume too much, and that we rely too heavily on technology which we understand too poorly — among

America's intellectuals. This is new. At the end of World War II, the left was optimistic — from Marxist to New Dealer, the political left championed dynamism; it was the conservatives who feared change, who worried about the erosion of America, the lack of stability. Today, the left has changed sides — seeing "progress" as illusory. Why?

I argue that dynamism and stasis are instrumental, not primary, variables. An individual favors the one or the other depending upon whether he believes that change benefits or threatens his core values. The left was once optimistic about change because it believed the future belonged to it — almost everyone believed (as Whittaker Chambers commented) that the left was the "winning side." Today, the left is far less confident — it sees America moving back to skepticism over central planning and political control, the loss of faith in the Gospel of Efficiency — and thus they have changed sides. And, as Hayek noted long ago, intellectuals are important in a modern society. When the intellectual community favors stasis, the odds shift dramatically toward stagnation.

Why all intellectuals aren't stasists, why some — like Postrel and most readers of *Liberty* — retain their belief in Progress is a critical question. We do have faith in the future — but why? I believe the answer to this basic question — and thus whether the forces of dynamism can prevail — requires a better understanding of the competing cultural values in America and how

these values have waxed and waned in overall influence over the last century. That analytic task — and the subsequent action agenda that would stem from it — remains the critical task for those seeking to preserve the Future from its Enemies. In that effort, Postrel's book can provide useful anecdotes but little policy guidance.

—Fred L. Smith, Jr.