

“Deeply Informed”

a review by Dick Burkhardt on

Power:

Limits and Prospects for Human Survival

By Richard Heinberg (2021)

Heinberg’s trademark style is careful and undramatic, but not his message: Humanity is in for a rough ride. We seem unable to escape from our biological roots – the lust for power, which he calls the ‘maximum power principle’. Simply lengthening our horizon from quarterly profits to happiness centuries hence would solve the problem, which he calls the “optimum power principle”.

Instead the politics of perpetual economic and financial growth continues to reign supreme, despite the escalating evidence of “ecological overshoot” in the form of climate catastrophes and burgeoning inequality and polarization. As limits-to-growth bear down every harder, Heinberg foresees a “Great Unraveling” and calls us to simplify and “degrow” our material world in big ways to at least mitigate the coming collapse. Neither does he shy away from a call to dramatically shrink our global population. And if we don’t do it ourselves, the four horsemen of the apocalypse are already pawing at the starting gate to dismantle the human Superorganism.

Heinberg is widely read, so his rejection of the technological utopianism of the Great Acceleration of the last two centuries is well grounded in the latest science and historical scholarship. He fully understands the limitations of renewable technologies but doesn’t succumb to the juvenile finger pointing of Derrick Jensen’s “bright green lies”. He knows that the problem is far deeper, from anthropological studies to Peter Turchin’s analysis of the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires. In fact, I’ve come to the same conclusions for many of the same reasons.

I only hope that global civilization doesn’t end up, as Heinberg suggests, reverting to a horticultural (gardening) society, one step beyond hunter-gatherer. He fears the historical tyrannies that characterized the next step - agrarian societies. But I suspect that a more low-tech and economically localized society, informed by the legacy of modern science and technology, will yield some new and far more survivable forms if we somehow manage to avoid the apocalypse.

In the end Heinberg calls us to abandon consumerism and rediscover the humility and wisdom traditions of the ages before it’s too late.

