

REVIEW ESSAY

THE WORLD AS A TOTAL SYSTEM
By Kenneth E. Boulding
183 pp. Beverly Hills, Calif.
Sage Publications. \$25.

HUMAN BETTERMENT
By Kenneth E. Boulding
224 pp. Beverly Hills, Calif.
Sage Publications. \$25.

Some years ago Kenneth E. Boulding wrote a review of ^{my} Essays
in Peace Research, Vols. I - V, Journal of Peace Research, 1981,
pp. , entitled "Twelve Friendly Quarrels With Johan Galtung".
Friendly they were, quarrels they were to some extent, and the
question is whether I should now continue in the same vein,
possibly with twenty-four or 144, depending on the mathematics,
friendly quarrels. Impossible. There is no way I know in which
the figures twelve and two could be combined so as to give the
number of **worries** that came to my mind when reading these two
delightful books. None of them really amounts to any quarrel
except one: a fundamental argument with Boulding, and of course
it is **on** the issue of structural violence. I shall come back
to that later, let me start by saying something about what the
reader has a right to expect from these books.

They are written by a person whose intellectual trajectory
is literary speaking astronomical. Boulding has read so much,
seen so much, thought so much, discussed so much, and in addition
to that written so enormously much that what comes out certainly
merits that rare distinction: wisdom. These are both flow-of-

consciousness books, extremely well organized as is to be expected with such an orderly mind, very embroidered; filled with eddies and water falls as ^{also} to be expected by such an imaginative, rich mind. I think the way to read them is to enjoy them, to listen to overtones and undertones and not take everything that Boulding has told his dictation machine too seriously at the level of the individual sentence or single paragraph, but very seriously indeed as a total construction.

At this point a reflection on individual life cycles might be in order. Boulding is today Distinguished Professor of Economics Emeritus at the University of Colorado. He is no longer a young man, he is in the early stage of retirement. It takes many, many years to arrive at his level of reflection. His "career" in purely bourgeois terms was made decades, even one generation ago for that matter. He could have rested on his laurels, for instance after that penetrating book essentially placing economic theory in a broad interdisciplinary context, The Image, a book which as far as I can understand is in the Nobel Prize class of economics. He did not, With ferocious intellectual appetites, stimulated by his strong moral, sometimes moralistic concerns he went on, on and on. Buddhists talk about eight levels of consciousness, not necessarily obtained in one life span. Boulding must have gone through several and one day it would be interesting to have him reflect more on his own intellectual odyssey.

However, the point I am arriving at is simply this: the role of perseverance in intellectual pursuits. There is nothing faintly comparable to the human brain as a place for storing impressions, processing them and producing at times fascinating outputs. We are often told that this capacity diminishes with age. True, this may be the case for detailed empirical work on the one hand and the particular type of mental concentration needed for mathematical type breakthroughs. Boulding has done both in earlier years; he would probably not be working in those directions today. His style of work is almost without footnotes, just reporting on his own reflections; not one which would easily give him access to a job as, say, assistant professor in a mainstream university today. So let this be a vote of gratitude that Kenneth continues, is totally honest to himself and to others and reports on the world as he sees it, in the style that belongs to wisdom and reflection rather than to empirically grounded explorations.

In The World As A Total System he is in the comteian tradition of discussing "the great chain of complexity" as a system of spaces, physical, biological, social, economic, political, communicative and evaluative. In these he sees a number of operations: mechanical, cybernetics and so on up to the reproductive types of interaction. The world is increasingly becoming more interconnected as measured by the **sevenfold** increase in trade since 1945; to Boulding this is a fairly irreversible tendency. And he does not seem to think that capitalism is in for any new

crisis of the same magnitude as the "greatest crisis in capitalism", the Great Depression.

The tragedy in this very promising development is the stability of the evaluations leading to violence, to national defense and nuclear war with their implications for the destruction of the human race (page 175). In this book the problem is stated, but not attempted solved--the book is rather concerned with describing the situation and sensitizing the reader to how inter-related the world is, how much it is a total system not only in the obvious geographical sense, but because of the inter-relations between the various "spaces" mentioned.

In the second book, Human Betterment, positions are taken, and developed. In a sense this is the more interesting book precisely because it is so normative that one gets more of a sense of where Boulding wants us to go, how he wants us to think and to act in order to obtain the four basic and important values: riches, justice, freedom and peace. These are actually very similar the set of values used by the World Order Models Project (WOMP) but that project added a fifth one as basic: ecological balance, a problem Boulding has worked on in other connections.

I cannot say that I get a clear image of an overarching idea inspiring Boulding's views. However, there are two important trends that can be found throughout his writings.

First, there is an optimism which perhaps is sometimes more of the heart than of the brain--a position I find totally defensible. Boulding himself has quipped that it is cheap to issue pessimistic predictions since you get away with it too easily: if you are right, you are right and if you are wrong then you can always say "isn't that wonderful?" Boulding's general view is that humankind is capable of precisely what the title of the book says, of "Human Betterment". The condition is a combination of cognitive grasp of the complexity of the phenomena involved, and a moral concern, a concerted striving in the direction of the basic values. In that sense his message is profoundly humanistic, the religious overtones are very general and totally in line with his long participation, over a life time, in the Society of Friends the Quakers. A religious minimum, in other words. I have no quarrel with that; this is a profoundly human awareness.

The other basic assumption seems to be a faith in the principle of entropic processes. With increasing complexity the system becomes more entropic, meaning the total system. Higher level decision-making skills are needed, unattainable unless a general systems approach is adopted.

In short, Boulding sees arrows in social time, from lower to higher, although fraught with danger at any time. I am not so sure I would agree with that, and this is where the basic and entirely friendly quarrel enters.

I think Boulding underestimates by any measure the fundamental role of structurally induced inequality, in other words of exploitation in human affairs. That you have more and I have less may be problematic; if I come to the conclusion that I have less because you have more it may become intolerable. Or, *more* particularly, very heavy legitimation processes are needed for me to accept, and those processes may be rather fragile. When the veneer of legitimation becomes too shallow simple self-interests breaks through and takes the form of *revolt*, the primordial revolt being puberty as experienced by any human being in this world, a process by which at least some measure of autonomy is gained.

When Boulding refers to the conference in Berlin 1884 as something that was due to "geographical ignorance" (p. 142)-when in fact what happened was that the colonial powers carved up Africa, deciding who should exploit which part- he seems to carry euphemisms somewhat too far. Does this mean that if they had been better informed they would have used the ruler less in dividing the map and complex curves more, following tribal contours? What difference would that have made in what was to follow? **N**ot so much economic exploitation since I would tend to agree with those who say that there is no convincing evidence that Africa over a long time, throughout the continent, paid off well for the European powers. But it paid off culturally as a missionary ground for all kinds of western ideas and not only christianity, as a way in which the West could affirm and confirm itself. It paid off

politically, militarily as a way of obtaining that global reach characteristic of our part of the world. And so on and so forth; maybe Boulding the economist has had a tendency to regard colonialism and imperialism in a too limited perspective, as a question of whether benefits really exceed the costs in purely monetary terms?

I can agree with Boulding that the 1817 Rush-Bagot Agreement disarming the Great Lakes was an achievement; but I am less sanguine about the 49th parallel as a border of peace between the US and Canada when, according to some reports, 70% of the Canadian economy is controlled from the US. What happens to Canadian autonomy? What happens to the potential for guided protest against Big Brother to the South when the economy is so obviously dependent on goodwill from the South? I could put it differently, what happens to entropy? -- and what happens to ~~the~~ human potential for independent evaluations?

The idea that Mexicans accepted the loss after the border of 1853 must be great news to the Mexicans: my experience in that country is that every school child knows about the US-Mexican War and remembers the event with bitterness, not with forgiveness. I would expect something sooner or later to happen, something disruptive, something waiting for its time to come. And the same applies to North America relative to Western Europe: I do not think a relationship so fraught with military and political control of Western Europe by the United States

(and Eastern Europe by the Soviet Union) is stable. Actually, when I am writing this the US Secretary of Defense is arguing very forcefully against the position taken by the opposition party in England, the Labor Party--something normally referred to as intervention in internal affairs.

But Boulding is of course right in saying that there is peace in the sense of absent of direct violence; just as I think I am right in saying that that peace is unstable unless something is done to the structural violence in this situation. And this is no position taken by chance or by neglect by Boulding: he simply denies any basic role to "exploitation" (p. 106).

So, here is my quarrel: I think Boulding tells half the story and the other half is just as important. In his story the upper side of human history, of , let us say, the countries in the first world today, get away far too easily, I could say with murder. The underside is seen as less developed, more primitive, as something that has to be brought into the process brought about from the top, by its insight and generosity.

It is tempting in this connection to refer to a third book by Boulding, Stable Peace (University of Texas Press, Austin and London 1978). That book is also dimensionalist in the sense that Boulding tells us what is important, which factors to take into consideration (and they are many), not so much how all these dimensions are interrelated. Rich on concepts, less rich on

hypotheses. But his general conceptualization of war and peace in terms of strength and strain, with the latter being stronger than the former in the case of war and weaker than the former in the case of peace, is useful. There are war-peace cycles, cycles of stable war and cycles of stable peace. There are intermediate phases of unstable war and unstable peace and there is Boulding's basic, fundamental optimism: the social system is moving toward stable peace. A total system is on the way, and in this book he even gives concrete recipes: remove national boundaries from the political agenda, respond nonviolently, piecemeal transformation of armies so as to get soldiers without enemies, strengthen intergovernmental organizations, also strengthen non-governmental organizations, and more research for peace. The last conclusion can of course be applauded by peace researchers who would like to see our piece of the total research pie increased, but today perhaps not by so many others. And the other formulas have a touch of the overworked, of the not only known but also tested and not only tested but found insufficient.

What is missing? Perhaps reference to the deeper, more vertical dimension of war and peace. Call it exploitation, or call it repression--the two words actually refer to the same thing only that the former evokes images of economic factors, the latter of freedom being crushed. In either case we get the same problem: when underground forces really well forth they come brusquely, violently or nonviolently. The response to exploitation/repression tends to be revolutionary. I certainly share with Boulding his

positive reference to Osgood's gradual reduction of international tension (GRIT), But are we to preach slaves that they should go in for gradual reduction of their condition, be patient and piece-meal? In other words, there is a difference between the violence that is already here, every day built into the social structure and requires emergency treatment, and the violence that may come tomorrow or the day after tomorrow and requires patience and care in order not to be triggered off, in order to be prevented.

I see removal of gross structural violence as a necessary condition if one wants to obtain what Boulding refers to as stable peace, precisely because structural violence not leads to but is strains on the system. It is not enough to know that the system is complex, is the opposite of chaos, that it has size and its complex. As a matter of fact, one should wish at this point that Boulding had been more generous, less sparse with his efforts to tell us how we can proceed further down the road from where he thinks the world is now (basically in unstable peace; unstable war not to mention stable war being left behind-- probably a much too negative view of "primitive" society). As a matter of fact, more recipes--that the reader might like or not-- would be useful, particularly given that Boulding has some negative comments on the peace movement: they might with their protests bring one of the parties into war.

However, be all of this as it may. I would conclude by recommending the books whole-heartedly. They are stimulating

reading, lucid and well written, filled with *surprising* insights, open windows, open doors, whole walls open. In fact, these are scaffoldings rather than complete houses, leaving to the reader to fill in gaps, remove pieces, put in others. One gets the impression that Boulding has taken from his enormous LEGO chest a vast array of building blocks and put them together according to his mood when the books were made. I expect in the years to come other blocks to be used, other compositions to be presented.] In any case, building by Boulding will remain fascinating and building on Boulding, including critically so, something very worthwhile to do. All of that even if he has a tendency to say "structural" when he really means "institutional" (a broader category of structure seems to be absent in Bouldings tool chest), he says "dialectical" when he really means "marxist" (a broader concept of dialectical such as found in daoism and buddhism also seems to be absent) and on page 157 in The World As A Total System he uses the word "transitive" to mean that "A is better than B" implies that "B is worse than A". Which may or may not mean that Boulding agrees with a famous slogan of the Iran of today, I once saw it on a wall in Tehran:

The United States is worse than the United Kingdom
 The United Kingdom is worse than the Soviet Union
 The Soviet Union is worse than the United States
 Each one of them is worse
 And more ugly
 Than the other two

Why? If not for stable war, at least because of their stable unpeace.

Johan Galtung
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