

Book Reviews by Ian Robertson



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Title: *Human Ecology: The Science of Social Adjustment*

Author: Thomas Robertson

First Edition: W. MacLellan (1948)

Reviewed: October 2012



“A lost classic, more relevant today than when it was written.”

Thomas Robertson produced his undeservedly obscure treatise in the years around WWII. He is neither a professional economist nor author – rather he is a physician – but he is curious, thoughtful, and pointed in his remarks. His thesis that society has for many decades headed down the wrong path, with modern fractional reserve (leveraged) banking and a systemically cultivated culture of debt, resonates today as we question both the root causes of the 2008 financial crisis and indeed how we live in our modern society.

Rating:



Out of 5 Stars

Had he written with the clarity and style (or had the podium or editors) of Galbraith or Hayek, his work might have endured better, but Robertson’s thesis surfaces today in the writings of many, including James Rickards, John Mauldin, Loretta Napoleoni and others who see a debt wall and possible societal collapse. There is even some kinship with the work of Minsky, and what makes Robertson’s work so relevant today – more so than when it was first published – is how close to the edge of the financial abyss we came. For Minsky, collapse is part of the system; for Robertson, the system will lead to collapse, period.

Robertson writes with a very antiquated style – like the 18th century’s Laurence Sterne, to use an example from literature (and those who have read Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* will know how convoluted his style can be) – which makes the gap between *Human Ecology*’s publication date (1948) and today’s crises seem much larger. Robertson writes from a modern perspective, though, so despite the archaic tone, his points still resonate today. John Locke, Thomas Paine, Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Malthus and others wrote seminal works that provided the philosophical underpinning of our western liberal democracies, and early economists such as Adam Smith and Karl Marx provided explanations and critiques of basic economic mechanisms. From his modern perch, Robertson attacks both the philosophical underpinnings and the financial mechanisms, which is very different than most contemporary writers who focus mainly on the mechanistic failings of the financial system. The result is a detailed mix of philosophy, sociology, economics and moralizing.

A proponent of behavioural psychology and an adherent of Francis Bacon’s scientific methodology, Robertson recognizes the foibles of the human mind and postulates that we have developed seven objectives to serve society: finance, industry, sanctions (police and armed forces), administration, politics, education and religion. He believes the objectives are listed in the order of importance to society, but that the optimal order should be exactly the reverse (i.e. finance should serve society, not vice versa). It is the comprehensive view of society that gives the book its title, but Robertson’s primary target is the first objective, finance, and it is on this subject, he spends the most time.

The evolution of the gold standard and modern banking are explained well, and with respect to both commercial and central bankers, Robertson states that many know their role, but no one, not even the central bankers, knows the objective, which is to create debt. To illustrate the point, he writes about usury and how society revolves around the use of interest (usury) and debt. As in a science fiction horror story, in Robertson's view, the machine has become self-perpetuating and society has been organised to the machine's aims, rather than to the goals of the community. "Until the financial system is comprehended in its reality, the present disorders will go on increasing until the total destruction of society has been encompassed."

Robertson goes further, stating "... in the space of 300 years the money system has achieved what neither religion, nor culture, nor nationality, nor conquest has ever accomplished, and that is – complete world domination." Robertson's conspiracy theory is based upon the root philosophy and mechanics of modern society, closer to John Perkins's first person narrative about the global machine in his *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*, than to Naomi Klein's scattershot *Shock Doctrine*.

Like Klein's excessively documented but poor work, Robertson's work has its failings. He is given to hyperbole and dogma, which unfortunately is in direct contradiction to his stated Baconian approach. For example, he writes that: paid advertising needlessly increases prices; "taxation is simply a device for the destruction of individual sovereignty;" and the League of Nations is "egregious." Robertson's central thesis resonates, and many of his digressions are interesting and often supportive, but it's hard to imagine the logical outcome of some of his points. How would any public services be provided without taxation? With respect to some of his ideas, Robertson might not feel out of place with survivalists who eschew all the trappings of society, though this is really not his point, as he is a staunch believer in community.