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## Book Review

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# An old fallacy

by Dr. Steven Bardwell

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*Entropy: A New World View*  
by Jeremy Rifkin and Ted Howard  
Afterword by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen  
Viking Press: New York, 1980  
305 pages, \$10.95

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The thesis of Jeremy Rifkin's new book, which he glorifies with the name of the "entropy world view," is that everything is getting worse. He is certainly right about the various rehashings of this thesis, of which Rifkin's is certainly the most banal, simple-minded and pretentious.

Rifkin's idea is that the second law of thermodynamics—which, accurately phrased, states that no transformation of energy can occur with 100 percent efficiency—has applications to economics and sociology. The idea got its most significant treatment from the economist who wrote an afterword to Rifkin's book, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen.

Any reader seriously interested in pursuing the cognitive (as opposed to propagandistic) content of Rifkin's book should leave his sophomoric regurgitation of Georgescu-Roegen, and read Georgescu-Roegen's 1971 book, *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*.

In that book, Georgescu-Roegen begins with an incisive critique of classical and current economics, pinpointing its fundamental fallacy in the assumption of some equilibrium or steady-state existence for industrial capitalism. As Georgescu-Roegen accurately points out, this is a false assumption.

In the next step of his argument, he shows, again correctly, that if a system like human society exists within a *given set* of natural or physical laws, two consequences follow. First, increasing complexity, growth, and economic development cannot be long-term tendencies, but only short-term perturbations in an overall progression toward stasis—in concrete terms, he says that finite resources, finite land areas, and fixed natural laws forbid infinite growth. Second, the natural long-term tendency of temporal change, for economic systems as well as physical ones, is governed by the only physical law which talks about a direction of evolution—the second law of thermodynamics. Since this law requires that within a

fixed system, everything must run down and eventually approach equilibrium, so must human society.

At this point in his book, Georgescu-Roegen unflinchingly draws the rigorous conclusion that follows from his premises: there are too many people; many must die; man can only survive in small agricultural settlements or troops, much like baboons today. The alternative, according to Georgescu-Roegen, is simple:

Will mankind listen to any program that implies a constriction of its addiction to exosomatic comfort? Perhaps the destiny of man is to have a short, but fiery, exciting and extravagant life rather than a long, uneventful, and vegetative existence. Let other species—the amoebas, for example—which have no spiritual ambitions, inherit the earth still bathed in plenty of sunshine.

The vegetative existence has found its popular champion in Jeremy Rifkin. Rifkin's attempts at philosophy are pathetic (he does not mention the single most influential proponent of the concept of progress and development, G. W. Leibniz); his historiography is a blatant lie (he lumps Plato and Aristotle together as believing in a static creation whose initial perfection has decayed under man's influence); and his attempts at science are laughable (he resurrects the oldest misinterpretations of the first and second laws of thermodynamics). But Rifkin's admirers betray the real significance of his work.

The Aquarian Conspiracy writ large turned out to applaud the publishing of his book—Willis Harmon of the Stanford Research Institute, Gar Alperovitz of the fascist National Center for Economic Alternatives, Hazel Henderson, author of *Creating Alternative Futures*, Sen. Mark Hatfield, and George McGovern, among others.

Most telling, however, is the fact that Rifkin's program for depopulation, ruralization, and ruthless austerity is exactly that of the funders and founders of the Aquarian Conspiracy, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. As one World Bank economist, Peter Knight, said of the book: "Rifkin and Howard call us to reflect on a law from which *there can be no escape* and to use our remaining nonrenewable energy resources frugally to ease the inevitable transition to the solar age."

There is a certain irony in the fact that any person who denies the possibility of human creativity and scientific endeavor to change the laws that limit mankind, who says that *his* mental processes are governed by physical laws like the second law of thermodynamics, is, in fact, correct. Rifkin's book is certainly a dramatic proof of the finiteness of *his* intellect. Fortunately, the majority of humanity, and its intellectual forefathers unmentioned by Rifkin, are forging the technological, scientific, and moral solutions to the problems Rifkin transforms into necessities.