

PART TWO

THE RISE AND POSSIBLE DECLINE OF MODERN SOCIETY



Ideas are very powerful, but they should be tested against the historical record, current conditions, and the future as best we can discern it. In Part 2 of this book, the alternative paradigm constructed in the first part will be used to try to explain how history has been unfolding, and what lies in the future if we carry on with business-as-usual. Manufacturing and production have always had a critical effect on the course of history, and particularly on the influence and capabilities of the group of nations often referred to as “Great Powers,” that is, those nations that can shape how humanity manages the whole planet. Fights between Great Powers can lead to world wars, but cooperation could lead to the improvement of life for people and the other organisms on this planet. Chapter 5 explores the processes of rise and decline up to the time of the Industrial Revolution.

The British were in the forefront of the Industrial Revolution that began in 1776 when the steam engine was invented, but in 1776 the United States also came into existence. Much of the time since its first centennial, the United States has been in a starring role, owing to its rise as a manufacturing nation. Chapter 6 traces this rise, as well as the changes in other parts of the international system, particularly with respect to Germany and the former Soviet Union.

No country has ever been so powerful, relative to other countries, as the United States was just after World War II. Some sort of decline was inevitable, but the focus of American dynamism shifted from manufacturing to matters military and financial during the six

decades after the last world war. The military obsession also brought down the Soviet Union during this time. Although the United States is still powerful, its middle class may not be for very much longer. Chapter 7 shows how we can use a production-centered approach to economics to explain both rise *and* decline.

Although the economic prognosis for a United States with a declining manufacturing sector might be grim, the entire global civilization will be in trouble if global warming, peak oil, and ecosystem destruction are not dealt with in a serious way. Except for some indigenous cultures, human beings have almost always been hard on the environment, and many past civilizations have fallen because of ecological mismanagement. Chapter 8 looks at the sources of the greenhouse gas emissions that threaten the stability of the climate; the effects that the end of the era of cheap oil will have on a civilization addicted to cars, trucks, and airplanes; and the dire results of destroying ecosystems, particularly for the provision of food.