

Gone Today, Here Tomorrow: Millennium Previews (1999)

Introduction

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The year 2000 has long been seen as a milestone in Western history and consciousness, a divide imposed by the Gregorian calendar that heralds the end of one era and the beginning of another. No matter that other cultures and civilisations have different calendars and account for the passage time in other ways and from other starting points. The universalising influence of Western civilisation around the world means that, in one way or another, people everywhere will be affected by this transition.

The end of the 20th century brought forth a flood of books and TV programs that attempt to come to grips with the recent past: what was the 20th century and what, exactly, does it mean? These are not simple questions. No doubt historians and social commentators will debate them and many others for a long time to come. The look back is important. In order to say anything sensible about the future we must know 'our place in time' or simply 'where we are from'. Our present, our particular here-and-now, is in fact only one version of many that were once possible. Had key events in the past worked out differently we would have been living in very different world. So a careful look at the past reveals how our present world was constructed. And let us make no mistake that, like the calendar itself, our present reality is indeed a construction - albeit an exceptionally complex one. It did not arise by accident, but by the interweaving of a host of socially-, and historically contingent forces and factors. It is for such reasons that deep insight into the nature of our present must necessarily precede any attempt to explore possible futures: we do not begin from an objective starting point. Rather, we begin in a condition of being saturated with a host of 'givens' which, because they are so familiar, tend to be seen as natural and even inevitable. But the fact is that if humanity is to have a worthwhile future, much that was taken for granted in the 20th century will necessarily have to change in the 21st.

Some 30 years ago in his classic work *The Pentagon of Power*, Lewis Mumford had this to say about a process he called 'the removal of limits.'
To conquer nature is in effect to remove all natural barriers and human norms and to substitute artificial, fabricated equivalents for natural processes: to replace the immense variety of resources offered by nature by more uniform, constantly available products spewed forth by the machine.

He then added:

From these general postulates a series of subsidiary ones are derived: there is only one efficient speed, faster; only one attractive destination, farther away; only one desirable size, bigger; only one rational quantitative goal, more. On these assumptions the object of human life, and therefore of the whole productive mechanism, is to remove limits, to hasten the pace of change, to smooth out seasonal rhythms and reduce regional contrasts - in

fine, to promote mechanical novelty and destroy organic continuity. 1

The conquest of nature, the removal of limits and the pursuit of economic growth for its own sake are among the guiding assumptions deeply inscribed within the global system at the turn of the century. These invisible but very powerful commitments serve to frame the world in specific ways and to colour how that world is understood and acted upon. Though this growth-addicted civilisation has been bumping up against global limits for some years there is an air of collective denial abroad: 'the problems are not that serious; we can find substitutes for scarce resources; new technologies will open out new options,' and so on.

The human species is nothing if not optimistic. But its powers of optimism are, perhaps, only matched by its collective powers of self-deception. The final element that makes this perceptual nightmare work, and work so effectively, is that the Western Industrial worldview operates within a mode of understanding in which short-term thinking has become the norm. What this means is that, while everyone is rushing around looking for short-term gains, attending to 'the bottom line,' gearing up for the next election, so the downbeat, dystopian futures that are clearly implied by a culture in denial of limits are de-focused, put routinely out of sight. Hence, 'the system' goes on in its destructive and literally myopic (short-sighted) way, placing everyone's life and well-being at risk: 'where there is no vision ...' etc.

Fortunately there is a solution - if we will collectively employ it. The turn of the century and the millennium provides a single historical, one-off opportunity to do so; then we will be back to business-as-usual (if business-as-usual has any meaning at all in the turbulence of the early 21st century context).

Having collectively looked back at the past one hundred years, and maybe in the case of a few brave souls, the last one thousand or more, there is, I think, a sense of disorientation that I can only conceive of as, metaphorically, a sense of 'vertigo', of being 'on the edge' of something vast and largely unknown. It is not dissimilar to what occurred in Victorian times when a sense of the true scale of 'deep time' shockingly overturned comfortable religious assumptions (of a human-centred world) as a result of the discoveries of geological science. Except now the disorientation is not about the past but about the future. When it is reflected upon clearly, the 21st century (let alone what, in some sense, lies beyond it) can be seen as a major problem, a threat even, because it contains so much that is new and unfamiliar.

The imaginative explorations of SF writers and film-makers drawing on the genre may have prepared the popular imagination with many visions of strange future societies, many of them quite disastrous for humankind. 2 Following on behind are the ranks of science popularisers - those who write about artificial intelligence, life extension, the digital economy, nanotechnology and so forth. But somehow, and at some level, everyone knows that there is much more to come and, moreover, that we are not at all well prepared for the revolutions ahead - what Jim Dator calls the 'tsunamis of change'.

Fortunately, the very forces of globe-spanning development, technical virtuosity and environmental threat that helped to characterise the late 20th century also stimulated a range of adaptive responses. Among these has been the development of the field of Futures Studies (FS) itself. In essence, what FS does is to explore the near-future context using a range of conceptual and methodological resources. Such explorations incorporate empirical elements (in, for example, identifying current and expected trends), but these are subsumed in what is essentially a qualitative discourse in which a range of high-quality interpretations about the near-term future are proposed, critiqued, negotiated etc. over time. What emerges from this process is, quite simply, a viable forward view or, rather, a number of them keyed to different needs and contexts. 3

It's my experience that when people discover the many rich interpretations out of which the forward view emerges, they find many, many uses for them. Individuals gain a new sense of purpose and perspective; schools gain a new set of concepts and tools for exploring future options with the young; businesses enliven their necessary focus on strategy with the powerful insights that emerge from disciplined foresight. Governments, in those rare cases where they take the forward view seriously, can canvass entirely new policy options.

All this, really, is the point.

As futurists never tire of explaining, there is no one future. Rather there exist a very wide variety of possible, probable and preferable ones. The whole point of exploring this array of future potential is to tease out the critical choices, strategies, possible responses in the here-and-now and to apply these in a thousand different ways. That, in a nutshell, is what this book is all about. The papers collected here were all published over the last few years in *The ABN Report*. Taken together, they provide many hints about the near-future, previews of 'things to come'. As such they give access to the evolving world of applied futures enquiry. None of the papers are academic. Rather, they each take up themes that are of urgent practical consequence for the ways things are understood and carried forward in the real world.

Part One looks at business and strategy. Here there are articles on publishing, electronic commerce, business intelligence and scenarios. *Part Two* considers the practice of foresight work. It looks at a number of places where such work is carried out and reports 'from the front line', as it were, on work in progress. The notion of design is one that has many implications for the future. After all, the human species is the dominant force on the planet. The future we get will either be the one we collectively design or one that finally overwhelms us. So *Part Three* looks at the interaction of society, planning and design.

Part Four takes up one of the central themes of GBN: learning and leadership. Some notes of skepticism are sounded among the overall confidence about what we can learn, know and be. Learning and leadership take on new

aspects and systemic thinking thrives. Part Five is about one of the great areas of challenge and change: work in the future - and as Eisler suggests, it's all about 'changing the rules of the game'. Many of the old rules don't work very well any more. So a careful review of what is not working about work and what may replace present approaches is usefully and succinctly reviewed here.

Science and technology are often over-stressed in the usual 'maps of the future' that are offered in popular media; but they do not figure quite so largely in this work. However three pieces in *Part Six* look at the genome project, nanotechnology and the information revolution. They sketch in some of the dynamics and associated concerns that are linked with these technical breakthroughs. Ethics and values are a big part of the answer to the over-dominance of science and technology. They put in an appearance in *Part Seven* where four contrasting views of the nature and role of ethics are succinctly put. *Part Eight* concerns progress, wealth and the new economics. This is a pivotal section because its subject encompasses much of the more detailed material in other sections. Decisions made about the present deeply inadequate framing of economics will be one of the most powerful influences on the nature and quality of life in the 21st century. So there is some trenchant criticism here, as well as some far-reaching innovations.

Finally *Part Nine* considers the millennium and the 21st century. A summary of the Millennium Project canvasses a wide range of issues and themes. The last paper by Tibbs provides a challenging diagnosis of the global outlook and thus is a fitting conclusion to this wide-ranging book.

Overall, *Millennium Previews* explores shaping issues and themes, perspectives and problems, new directions and possible strategies that are all part of the fast-changing and very challenging early 21st century environment. As such the book provides a tentative and collective answer to the problem raised by Mumford and, in so doing, provides a basis for qualified optimism. Here can be seen a number of 'solutions in progress' that are the essence of applied foresight. Here are some of the resources that can help an over-extended global megaculture based, to no small extent, on redundant Western models, move toward more sustaining and sustainable pathways into the future.

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