

The Future of Futurism: An Analysis

BY JOHN H. DOUGLAS

Amidst the din and chaos of falling metal and shouting men, Alvin Toffler was trying to hold a press conference. Ten years after he coined the phrase "future shock" and five years after writing the best-selling book by that name, Toffler was to be the concluding speaker at the second general assembly of the World Future Society in Washington (SN: 6/14/75, p. 380). But now the assembly exhibitors were rushing to dismantle their booths in time for the cavernous hall to be prepared for a corporation banquet, while in one corner a small area had been surrounded by curtains and labeled with a hand-lettered sign, "Press Room." From the crowd of reporters jostling for a better position in the cramped enclosure, I tried to ask how much closer to future shock Toffler feels civilization is now, than when he wrote the book. Suddenly, the flimsy aluminum and cloth partition collapsed on him and the destruction outside rang in with all its fury. Straightening himself, Toffler replied calmly, "It is upon us."

The incident was symbolic of the way many futurists, including Toffler, view present events—that they are part of a fundamental breakdown of industrial society: its technology, its economics, its government. Along with this conviction has also come a new feeling about themselves, an identification with futurism as a movement that must persuade the world to change its ways before the time is too late. Like most movements, this new spiritual awakening has much to offer, but also much at risk.

The offering is clear: A consciousness of the future and second thoughts about the long-range consequences of our actions is long overdue. Though computer models predicting the imminent demise of civilization tend to be oversimplified in their assumptions, overstated in their conclusions and impractical in their proposed remedies, a useful function has certainly been fulfilled—the consequence of continued reactive, short-range planning is seen to be an accumulation of slowly developing problems into a crisis that could overwhelm humankind. We have been "lurching into the future," Toffler says, and the time has come to adopt a longer view.

But how? Most futurists would say

through basic, even radical, changes in existing institutions, a conviction that tends both to transform them from speculators into activists and to place them in direct opposition to present national leaders seeking more gradual change. Many futurists also talk of "humanizing" science and technology and establishing new goals for economics—an idea that at least challenges established professionals in these fields and at most threatens the very nature of objective research and rational thought on which our civilization is based.

Herein lie the risks, for what the futurists would substitute for the existing Establishment is usually vaguely defined and not all that different from the original purpose of today's institutions. The hierarchically controlled, overconsumptive culture of the industrialized nations "is now unraveling," declares Toffler, and "that's the best news the planet's had for 300 years." But what he proposes as a substitute is "anticipatory democracy"—letting the people decide for themselves what sort of future they want. Thomas Jefferson might take some offense if today's activists began claiming this as a wholly original proposal for this country.

A philosophical basis for this future society is laid out in terms of "secular humanism" by author and self-styled "humanistic scientist" John Platt, associate director of the Mental Health Research Institute of the University of Michigan. The philosophy rests on four bases: ecology ("the first ethical science"), a new personalism (awareness of personal interactions—"love"), existential responsibility (responsibility for creating one's own future) and cybernetics (an experimental feedback approach toward choosing new goals for society). Secular humanism arises not only in response to present crises but also from present opportunities. Within the next two or three years, Platt points out, the majority of people on earth will finally have access to television (with its "instant outrage and consciousness-raising power") and the majority of production in the world will be in the hands of multinational corporations ("the only force big enough to stand against the nation-state").

But how will this new secular humanism be applied? Any dozen futurists

would offer at least 13 separate answers. Certain key phrases, however, do keep recurring:

- **Networks.** Decision making in general, and government decisions in particular, are to depend less on "orders from the top" as from public feedback through new communications-political action networks; what Toffler calls "modular government."

- **Liberation.** Women and minorities are to exercise their rightful share of influence in national affairs and developing countries are to use their natural resources as leverage in gaining a more equitable share of the world's wealth.

- **Value-centered economics.** The "externalities" of pollution, resource depletion and social upheaval must be factored into economists' equations.

- **Humanized science and technology.** Experts alone should no longer be trusted to decide what research should be attempted or what new machines put to use; the public, and especially those directly affected, must be given a larger say.

All of these issues converged during a dramatic confrontation that threatened to split the Washington assembly down the middle. A women's caucus complained that the meeting was white-male-establishment-expert dominated and successfully lobbied for inclusion of two women, one a black, as speakers for a plenary session. A cheering, standing ovation by the assembly for the oration of Hazel Henderson left little doubt that a responsive chord had been struck.

A self-educated "social critic," the only woman and only non-"expert" on the Congressional Technology Assessment Advisory Council, Henderson pulled no punches in her attack on the status quo. "Economics has become a substitute for thought," she said, and should be replaced with a "social-cost model of the economy." Science has become a "religion," and society is consequently suffering from "an overload of rationalism." Since specialists have failed to solve the problems facing the world, the *people* must organize to "work on a path of expanded awareness wherever we are."

Later, in an interview, she elaborated on the sterility of the "whole Cartesian trip," as she refers to the scientific-rational training of today's leaders.

The current methods of risk analysis in such issues as genetic engineering should have more explicitly value-laden input from the public at large: "Scientists have confused where their expertise leaves off." We cannot go back to a preindustrial era, but since "the genie is out of the bottle—all you can do is to fight, to resist." As a specific example of such resistance, Henderson points with approval to the "People's Computer System," a California organization she says is gathering the same sort of revealing data about corporations that they collect on consumers.

The question still remains, however, whether The System requires preplanned, radical change or whether it is still capable of responding to the evolutionary forces of the market, presently constituted democratic government and a new generation of more broadly trained scientists. The latter point of view still has some defenders among the futurists.

When asked a typically leading question about the "dinosaur government that munches on tax dollars," Ben Wattenberg, co-chairman of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority responded that he thought the American system has been handling its problems adequately. Ian H. Wilson of the General Electric Company argues that the profit motive has never been as all-powerful as some economists have argued and that corporations must respond as society pays less attention to material needs and more to social ones. While control of manufacturing may continue to become concentrated in the hands of a few large companies, he says, small businessmen are still in the vanguard of the services industry—and the market is moving in their direction. Finally, Donald Paarlberg of the Agricultural Department put the matter of scientific expertise into a humorous perspective: Research, he said, "is like drilling an oil well, you never know whether you're five feet from a million dollars or a million feet from five dollars."

"It is the thesis of this book that there are discoverable limits to the amount of change that the human organism can absorb. . . . We may define future shock as the distress, both physical and psychological, that arises from an overload of the human organism's physical adaptive systems and its decision-making processes."

—Alvin Toffler, 1970,
Future Shock

In his book, Toffler maintains that present industrial society will be superseded by one characterized by extreme transience, novelty and diversity, and that the psychological and organizational overload this "super-industrial society" will bring to individuals and institutions will cause the same sort of shock a traveler to a distant land experiences when he immerses himself in another culture. Echoing this sentiment, Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) told the assembly, "We must be pioneers in time, rather than space."

But what generation hasn't been? Within the lifespan of today's elder generation, America has been transformed from a rural to an urban society, transported by 125 million motorized vehicles rather than horses, and linked by a communications network of telephones and radios that were incomprehensible a century ago. Whether future innovations will hold more "shock" than these is at least open to question.

Too often, eager futurists lack a knowledge of history and a sense of proportion. "Malthus was right all along," says Lincoln Gordon of the Woodrow

Wilson International Center for Scholars; famine and poverty have been the rule rather than the exception throughout history and a smaller percentage—though larger number—of people suffer now than ever before. Resource and institutional limitations are not the most important ones standing in the way of utopia, but rather more deeply entrenched, ancient customs. India, for example, could easily feed itself twice over with the natural and technological resources it already has, he says, only history makes one doubt whether any rapid solution can be found to the societal inertia that still impedes that country's further development.

The battle between the intellectual community (which most futurists represent) and established authority is a long and venerable one in the West, but since any society, past or future, must be run by compromise, much of the current debate over sharply polarized visions of what the future should be seems counterproductive. (Asian specialist Edwin O. Reischauer credits much of China's long history of accomplishment to a system that, from the beginning, incorporated the scholarly class as an integral part of the government.) At worst, abandonment of rational training and objective scientific inquiry could lead to government by hysteria, or more probably, totalitarianism.

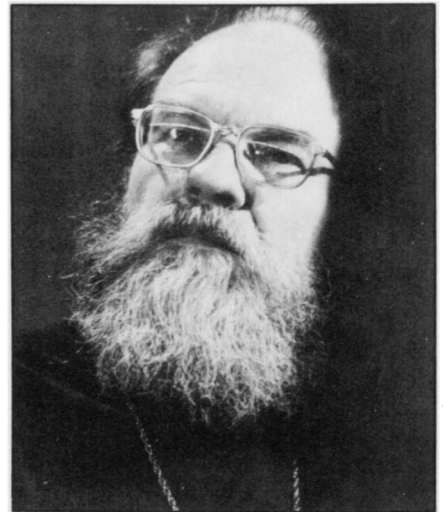
Still, futurism, as a movement, cannot be ignored or cast aside as merely so much intellectual rhetoric, for the future now lies, more than ever, within the power of humankind to shape. The problem is one of balance—recognizing the most promising areas for change, neither blaming nature for our ills like some ancient astrologer, nor destroying the benefits of a hard earned civilization through unnecessarily disruptive revolution. As Shakespeare wrote: "This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeit of our own behavior—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars: as if we were villains by necessity." □



Toffler: Industrial society "unraveling."



Henderson: "Overload of rationalism."



Platt: Toward a "secular humanism."

Photos: John H. Douglas