and toward a global cultural network. Less expensive to build and maintain, and vastly more individually useful on a daily basis than a global military shield would be, it could give everyone access to their own spatial world, allowing each individual to take the responsibility for his or her own actions, and ensure world peace through mutual understanding rather than mutually assured destruction.

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The Future and Futurism

Harry Wagschal

Futurist literature provides us with an invaluable tool for examining existing trends and the kind of world that might exist in the twenty-first century. As Fred Polak has so eloquently pointed out in his Images of The Future, if we are to survive we must begin to invent viable images and discover the best ways to utilize them.

Now, there are grave difficulties involved in talking about emerging trends and future images; technology seems to have a life-force of its own, and modern countries often disagree as to what constitutes “values” and “meaning” in life. Even with all these major difficulties, however, we can delineate certain positive “features” or “trends” that might eventually lead to a viable “image of the future” for Western culture.

From my own reading of futurist literature and significant social criticisms, I have determined various features that represent powerful models for thinking about future trends and the possibility of a world community in the twenty-first century. Surely one of the most important transformations occurring presently is a shift towards global interdependency, economically and politically. John Naisbit, in his best-selling book, Megatrends, has shown quite clearly how economics and the growth of technology have converged to produce a world where economic cooperation to produce various products has led to political alliances unthinkable only one generation ago. At the same time, a growing consciousness of the deteriorating ecological and environmental balances necessary to sustain life on the planet has led to the formation of political parties, like the European-based Green Party, that support a form of ecological and holistic thinking unknown in Western culture till now.

With mass communication and electronic networks already shaping a “global village” (as Marshall McLuhan predicted more than twenty-five years ago), an “information society” is replacing the “industrial ethos” that has dominated modern society since the nineteenth century. Inevitably, this information society will drastically change modern man’s working and leisure habits and create new priorities and political movements. Will our worldwide information network allow us to realize our dreams of a world community and a politically integrated planet where cooperation and diplomacy replace conflict?

Another significant idea that will surely influence our future: small-group power and decentralization. Some years ago the World Future Society sponsored a major conference with the title “Thinking Globally, Acting Locally.” Surely, E. F. Schumacher’s classic Small Is Beautiful will remain as one of the most powerful books ever written about modern industrial society. Decentralization and small-scale planning are trends that might play a major role in undoing the fragmentation and alienation inherent in modern industrialized societies.

Unfortunately, the very forces that have produced such dynamic and imaginative thinking about modern society have also led to disturbing trends towards primitive fundamentalism in most Western and Middle Eastern countries. The emergence of fanatical television evangelism and the attempt to return to a kind of medieval religiosity remains distinct threats to humanist and rational thinking everywhere. Humanists must continue to combat these forces. In “Secular Gods and Humanism,” I suggested that ethical culture schools, general education, humanistic rituals, and cable television might begin to play an important role in disseminating the humanist ethic to the general public.

Ivan Illich, Theodore Roszak, and others have framed a rich source of educational and social alternatives that could materialize humanist ideas in all walks of life and prevent both nineteenth-century industrial technology and fundamentalist theology from stopping the emergence of a “New Age” where reason and human values prevail. The challenge of major dramatic changes in both modern and nonindustrialized countries will test the mettle of humanist thought on the planet. With sufficient imagination, political will-power, and persistence, the search for a world community might one day produce that reality.

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