



G L O B A L
B U S I N E S S
N E T W O R K

GBN AUSTRALIA BOOKCLUB

INTELLECTUAL TOOLS FOR THE YEARS AHEAD

Once upon a time, it all seemed so simple. We lived then in a world of either/ors — on the one hand or the other — a world of blacks or whites, rights or wrongs, war or peace, a full time career or unemployment. It was a world where choice was easy, where one political party governed and the other opposed, and where the bosses bossed and the workers worked. We lived in the city or we lived in the bush, and we worked for the private sector or we worked in the public service. Things got better or they got worse, and we all seemed to know how which became which. In those days of yore, life was linear: This caused that, and that other was caused by this other. There was nothing complicated about it all; or at least that's how it seemed at the time!

Under the surface of our collective consciousness however, things have always been complex. Life on earth has never been linear, as events have always been multi-causal. That we have tended to see the world only in dualities, of simple causes and effects, is because we have chosen so to do, not because that was the way it actually is.

The 'new' complexity is therefore the rediscovered 'old', or at least admitted: We now realise that we do indeed live in a world of complex and dynamic change and that we ourselves are key contributors to such complexity and dynamics, the current Hansonite nostalgia for the simple ways, notwithstanding. While complexity has always been with us, our past failure to acknowledge that fact has had us living close to a fool's paradise. Not only can we not go back to the 'good old days', but even if we could, with our new appreciation of the nature of things, they would not seem anywhere near as 'good' as once they did! But equally, this is not to say that things have got much better, nor, even with our new consciousness, does it necessarily follow that things will improve in the future either.

Part of the problem lies in our inability to decide, amidst all of the complex messiness of the world about us, what it is that actually constitutes an improvement to any given work or life situation. It is even very difficult, in this era of mass and electronic communication, to decide who it is that decides that! We are already seeing that actions taken today may have quite unforeseen and potentially seriously degrading impacts on those who will live in the future, just as we are very aware that small actions taken locally can have very significant global consequences. What once was confined to the 'here and now' is now appreciated to have consequences for both there and then! Development projects that once were deemed to be satisfactory if they met one or two criteria of progress, now need to be seriously reconsidered in the light of the recognition that 'designs for progress' must be as aesthetically acceptable as they are technically possible, as ethically defensible as they economically viable, as culturally feasible as they are socially desirable, as spiritually compatible as they are practically manageable, and as ecologically responsible as they are politically sensible.

What does all this mean to business organisations, and the communities, organisations and societies in which they must operate? And what does it all mean to each of us as individuals trying to make meaning out of the lives that we live, and the work that we do.

Through our Bookclub selections this month, we examine each these two questions in turn: *Measuring Progress* is a book, edited by Richard Eckersley, based on papers presented at a conference held in Canberra in July 1997 in which the key question, is life getting better? is addressed. From the big questions, the focus shifts to the individual, and what life as a computer programmer means to Ellen Ullman as she lives out her life *Close to the Machine*.

Measuring Progress — Is life getting better?

Richard Eckersley (editor), CSIRO publishing 1998

As Eckersley claims in his preface, this book represents one of the most 'wide ranging explorations of progress yet undertaken'. Almost two dozen researchers, spanning social, economic and environmental perspectives and ranging in scale from the personal to the global, have contributed to this very comprehensive and impressive work.

The focus is essentially about the definition and measurement of a 'better life' as evaluated through a number of different key indicators of the dimensions that are increasingly regarded as elements of that state, which is increasingly recognised in all of its complexity. The emphasis on measures is justified, Eckersley submits, on the grounds that "indicators are generally designed to make complex phenomena or conditions quantifiable, perceptible and understandable ... they simplify, measure and communicate trends and events". Yet he also recognises that there are those who justifiably argue about the inappropriateness of quantifying matters which are intrinsically unquantifiable — and the emergence of what has been termed the 'the indicators industry'. At base, however, it is argued that something needs to be done to allow evaluations of 'progress' to be made in a social climate which increasingly rejects the simplicity and inadequacy of single indicators such as Gross Domestic Product. Ultimately, as the editor posits in his introductory chapter, we need to effectively deal with a number of key issues which extend beyond the embrace of GDP: What do we want from life? How do we best get what we want? And, what values will promote what is wanted and discourage that which is isn't? In succeeding chapters, these and other seminal questions are explored in four domains: Broad perspectives on progress and its measurement, well-being and quality of life, socio-economic issues, and the environment and ecological sustainability, with a discussion and summary providing the synthesis at the close.

Multi-dimensionality of the matter of progress and improvement is the pervasive theme throughout the book. As Mike Salvaris puts it "the strength and health of communities, of social relations and social capital, of social inclusion and civic participation, and of the ethic of citizenship and democracy, are as important as some of the more immediate material aspects of individual well-being and probably better predictors of national well-being in the long term". This is a theme which continually recurs in the contributions from such well-known names as Eva Cox, Michael Pusey, and Ann Harding, while the importance of the essence and integrity of the natural environment is further integrated into the debate through the writings of equally familiar researchers such as Valerie Brown and Ian Lowe. As Professor Brown argues, "measuring national progress will require indicators capable of assessing progress towards meeting the shared community vision of each individual locality; establishing strategic alliances between government alliances and the civil society; reducing the ecological footprint of both urban and rural areas; interpreting the cumulative social, economic and environmental effects of change; and establishing coherent decision-making between local, regional and national scales". And how is that for recognising complexity beyond the simplicity of conventional economic indicators like the GDP, and indeed for suggesting order within the complex chaos.

Earlier in the book, Michael Pusey had made the telling observation that while economic indicators suggest that the Australian economy 'is up', "Middle Australians seem to be saying that their own experience leads to quite different judgements of what counts as progress, quality of life, standard of living, well-being and welfare". This is a dilemma to which a number of the contributors refer, and it highlights the difficulties of deciding both what it is that can provide a comprehensive indicator of 'progress', and quite how that is to be expressed as a 'measurement'.

These questions remain yet to be fully answered, but answered they must be if we are to truly grasp the complexity of how it is that we want to, and should, live as a society. As Professor Bob Gregory concludes in his final summing up "there seems so much to be done. We should persevere". ●

Close to the Machine: Technophilia and its Discontents

Ellen Ullman, City Lights Books, San Francisco 1997

It is with matters of quality of life, standards of living, and personal welfare that Ellen Ullman is also concerned — albeit her own, and tacitly at that. In this quite delightful, amusing, yet extremely poignant, even melancholy book, we are exposed to life at the edge of the post-modern ‘information revolution’. Ullman is a computer programmer who lives and loves in a cyberworld ‘close to the machine’. She works in a virtual world for a virtual company in which “projects come and go like images in a screen saver, lovely and vibrant, one image fading into another, a steady flow of change it does no good to try to capture”. Her personal relationships are not dissimilar.

What a terrible loneliness her writing evokes: A way of life which reeks of enslavement to a world of abstract commands and digital behaviour. It’s right or it’s wrong: The program either works or it doesn’t. Complexity is reduced to a code of binary logic, and the quest is for ever-more effective and efficient ways of dealing with data and information.

Here is a perplexing, frightening world of innovation, and of the price it exacts on those who engineer it: Old is a word which programmers know not what to do. “We throw away old hardware. Old programmers are suppose to give way to twenty-year-olds. The new is what we desire, and the newer yet. Only software gets to age.” It has, our story teller informs us, its own lifecycle “from birth, to productive maturity, to bug-filled old age”, and it reaches old age because too much time and effort has been invested in it. Dozens, maybe hundreds of programmers work on routines and systems over their lifetimes so that “by the time a computer system becomes old, no one completely understands it”. Yet a system ‘made of junky old technology becomes, paradoxically, precious’ and assumes a virtual life of its own. “Its very functioning demands we stop treating it as some mechanism we’ve created like, say, a toaster, and start to recognise it as a being with a life of its own”. There is little choice about how it should be treated for it exceeds human control: It must either be respected, or it must be killed.

Yet through this life cycle analogy there is a danger that we, the computing illiterates, lose sight of the quite incredible pace of change, not just in computers themselves, but in those who work to program the things. Programmers survive only as long as they stay in a perpetual state of learning which, as Ullman describes of herself, is only possible through the maintenance of a ‘posture of ignorant humility’. Through her twenty odd years of programming computers, the writer admits to having to teach herself “six higher-level programming languages, three assemblers, two data retrieval languages, eight job-processing languages, seventeen scripting languages, ten types of macros, two object-definition languages, sixty eight programming-library interfaces, five varieties of networks, and eight operating environments”. Is it any wonder that, now ‘middle aged’, she is starting to question this pace of change, this constant rate of self transformation as she feels herself slipping off the cutting edge so necessary for her continued life as a programmer. As she thinks the unthinkable, of not renewing her subscription to the Microsoft Professional Developer, she is at once terrified and yet strangely ‘buoyant and light’. For the first time in nineteen years, she admits to herself, and to her readers, ‘the new has no hold on me’. Time tells her to stop chasing after the newest everything. “Biological life does not want to keep speeding up like a chip design, cycling ever faster year by year”. Yet this is what she must do, and indeed continues to do as at the close of book, she lands a contract for the next eighteen months or so. And she commits herself once again to the characteristic life of her subspecies — muddling through without certainties.

This really is a wonderfully graphic and fulfilling book which beautifully illustrates the post-modern paradox of the allure of the inhuman machine for the all too human person. Cybermorphs are those who comprise part human part machine: As Ellen Ullman portrays them through her self understanding, computer programmers are the first such creatures among us. It is not an appealing notion for the rest of us. ●

1994

- The Seven Cultures of Capitalism* by Charles Hampden-Turner & Fons Trompenaars (Piatkus)\$21.20
- * *Capitalism(s) in Competition* by Eric Best (GBN)\$17.00
- Global Change* by Keith Suter (Albatross Books).....\$21.25
- Where to From Here* by Leonie V Still (Business & Professional Publishing).....\$23.75
- * *The Structure of Entrapment* by Charles Hampden-Turner (GBN) ..\$17.50
- * *White Eye* by Blanche d'Alpuget (Viking)\$16.95
- The Management Myth* by Richard David Hames (Business & Professional Publishing)\$33.95
- The Ecology of Commerce* by Paul Hawken (Weidenfeld & Nicholson) ..\$29.75
- The Executive Compass* by James O'Toole (Oxford University Press) \$33.95
- * *Messengers of the Gods* by James Cowan (Random House)\$14.45
- * *Values and the Corporation* by James Ogilvy et al (GBN).....\$17.00
- The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* by Peter Senge (Nicholas Brealey)\$42.45
- * *Turbulent Mirror* by John Briggs & F. David Peat (HarperCollins) \$26.95
- The Last Three Minutes* by Paul Davies (Weidenfeld & Nicholson)\$12.95
- Leadership and the New Science* by Margaret Wheatley (Berrett-Koehler)....\$25.45

1995

- Framing Technology* by Leila Green & Roger Guinery (Allen & Unwin)\$19.95
- Competing for the Future* by Gary Hamel & C. K .Prahalad (Harvard Business School Press) (PB) \$25.95 (HB)\$46.95
- The Future Eaters* by Tim Flannery (Reed Books)\$33.95
- Learning Unlimited* by Alastair Rylatt (Business & Professional Publishing)\$29.70
- Enterprising Nations: The Karpin Report* (Commonwealth of Australia)\$25.45
- Australian Civilisation* edited by Richard Nile (Oxford University Press)\$21.20
- Creative Compartments* by Gerard Fairtlough (Adamantine Press)\$25.50
- Challenge to Change* by Richard Eckersley and Kevin Jeans (CSIRO Publications)\$29.70
- The Death of Economics* by Paul Omerod (Penguin Books)\$14.50
- The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* by Christopher Lasch (Norton)\$33.95
- The Knowledge Creating Company* by Ikujiro Nonaka & Kiroataka Takeuchi (Oxford University Press)\$46.95
- * *Living Without a Goal* by James Ogilvy (Doubleday)\$34.95

1996

- Jihad vs McWorld* by Benjamin R Barber (Times Books)\$34.95
- * *Lords of the Rim* by Sterling Seagrave (G P Putnam's Sons)\$43.95
- Trust* by Francis Fukuyama (The Free Press)\$39.95
- How are we to Live?* by Peter Singer (Mandarin Books)\$14.50
- An Intimate History of Humanity* by Theodore Zeldin (Minerva)\$16.95

- * *Having Our Say about the Future* (ASTEC)Free
- Maximum Leadership* by Charles Farkas, Philippe de Backer and Allen Sheppard (Orion)\$16.95
- Leadership in a New Era* edited by John Renesch (New Leaders Press Sterling and Stone)\$42.95
- Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation* by Kees van der Heijden (John Wiley & Sons).....\$42.95
- The State We're In* by Will Hutton (Vintage).....\$16.95

1997

- Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman (Bantam Books).....\$14.50
- The Dilbert Principle* by Scott Adams (HarperCollins)\$21.25
- The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Or der* by Samuel P. Huntington (Simon and Schuster)\$33.95
- The Future of Capitalism* by Lester Thurow (Allen and Unwin).....\$16.95
- The Foresight Principle* by Richard Slaughter (Adamantine Press)\$33.50
- Burying the 20th Century* by Richard Hames with Geraldine Callanan (Business and Professional Publishing)\$33.95
- Is Australia an Asian Country y?* by Stephen Fitzgerald (Allen & Unwin)\$16.95
- Mastering the Infinite Game* by Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars, (Capstone)\$33.10
- The Living Company* by Arie de Gues (Harvard Business School Press).....\$33.95
- Learning to Plan and Planning to Learn* by Donald Michael (Miles River Press)\$35.95
- Tyranny of Fortune* by Reg Little and Warren Reed (Business & Professional Publishing)\$25.45
- Intelligent Leadership* by Alistair Mant (Allen & Unwin)\$21.25
- Factor 4: The new Report to the Club of Rome* by Weizsacker & Lovins (Allen & Unwin)\$21.25
- Cybercorp: the new business revolution* by Games Martin (Amacom).....\$42.45

1998

- Corporate Collapse: Regulation, Accounting and Ethical Failure* by F. L. Clarke, G W Dean & K. G. Oliver (Cambridge)\$25.45
- Japan: A Reinterpretation* by Patrick Smith (Pantheon Books)\$42.45
- Do Lunch or be Lunch* by Howard Stevenson with Jeffrey Cruikshank (Harvard Business School Press)\$49.95
- The Fourth Turning* by William Strauss and Neil Howe (Broadway Books).....\$26.95
- Imagined Worlds* by Freeman Dyson (Harvard University Press)\$40.50
- Scenario Planning: Managing for the Future* by Gill Ringland (John Wiley & Sons).....\$51.80
- Learning from the Future: Competitive Foresight Scenarios* by Liam Fahey & Robert M Randall (John Wiley & Sons)\$54.00
- The Hungry Spirit* by Charles Handy (Hutchinson)\$29.75
- Measuring Progress* Richard Eckersley (editor) (CSIRO)\$31.45
- Close to the Machine* by Ellen Ullman (City Lights Books)\$20.65

*These books are currently unavailable

O R D E R F O R M

YES! Please send me the following books (please tick your selection)

Please add 10% to your order to cover postage and handling

Please find enclosed my cheque for \$..... made payable to Global Business Network Australia Pty Ltd; or

Please debit my Bankcard / Mastercard / AMEX / Visa / Diners

Card No.:

Expiry date: / / Today's date: / /

Name of company:.....

Name of cardholder:

Signature:

Your delivery address:.....

Additional copies of GBN Australia BookClub titles are available while stocks last!

GBN Australia BookClub Level 1, 71-73 Lithgow St St Leonards NSW 2065 Ph: (02) 9439 4255 Fax: (02) 9439 4511



GLOBAL BUSINESS NETWORK