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INTELLECTUAL TOOLS FOR THE YEARS AHEAD

What strange logic we employ, we humans, as we crash and bash our way into tomorrow's world(s)! Somewhere along our yesterdays we got it into our heads, or our minds at least, wherever and whatever they might be, that it would be a help to our 'progress' if indeed we distinguished between ourselves and the rest of our world. And we have been bedevilled by this logos of dualism ever since. We recognised a 'nature' and then immediately separated ourselves from it by identifying ourselves as 'society' or 'civilisation' or 'culture'. In this manner we not only discriminated between human beings and the rest, but between beings and things in general (which essentially was everything else on earth, including all other living organisms). As this included things that we human beings ourselves created, we made up a new distinction between artificial or synthetic things and natural things. We went much further yet with divisions between that earth and a heaven somewhere beyond, and that meant that we had to discriminate between the secular and the sacred: between facts and faith, between scientific knowledge and prophetic knowledge. Good and bad, right and wrong, friend and enemy, government and opposition, corporation and society, system and environment, man and woman, empowered and disempowered, moral and immoral, local and global, modern and postmodern — the dichotomies we create are legion; and with every such distinction comes the need to choose between one or the other. In this manner it is we ourselves who generate the very divisions and dilemmas that we spend the rest of our time on earth trying to resolve! It is we who create the zero sum game that we are then destined to spend the rest of our lives playing.

It's no wonder that economists rule the world. They have taken dualistic thinking, or at least opining, and made it paradigmatic, with their insistence on reference to what seems to be happening on the one hand, which is often the opposite to that which seems to be happening on the other. Enigmatically it was, of course, one of the fathers of their own discipline who envisaged the power of the invisible hand.

If human intelligence is a selective evolutionary advantage, it is often very difficult to see what it is! (Ooops!! There goes another dichotomy — evolution and creationism). Perhaps, just like evolutionary pathways, the logic that we use to make sense out of what seems to be happening around us has us finishing up in intellectual cul-de-sacs from time to time. And here I include within 'we' and 'us' any being or thing that has any interest in, and capacity at, making such sense. There should be nothing astonishing about that. Blind alleys that are characterised by a lack of adaptive capabilities have happened since time immemorial; just ask any old dinosaur!

For all this talk of the self-inflicted nature of the paradox of the dichotomy, there are encouraging signs that a new fuzziness is beginning to permeate our consciousness, and that we are beginning to heed the immortal counsel of Robert Pirsig in his *Zen and the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance* to throw sand in the eyes of the bull whenever we are stuck on the horns of a dilemma.

Neither of this month's book selections explicitly address the matters explored above (no new phenomenon here, as any long term reader would have noted over the years). Indeed both actually further fuel the issues of dualistic logic. In the case of Neil Gershenfeld's *When Things Start to Think*, the inference is that things don't naturally think, but that artifices can be created that, to all intents and purposes, do! And that this provides a challenge for we human beings. This provides a wonderfully fuzzy arena in which to explore the false distinctions between humans, their artifacts, and the rest of nature. A similarly messy space for exploring a host of questionable dichotomies is provided by Peter Schwartz and Blair Gibb in their treatise about *When Good Companies do Bad Things*.

The reviewers of both of these books are to be commended for throwing the sand that allows readers to escape the horns of the dilemmas posed by the respective authors, and to explore for themselves, prompted by the texts and the comments of the reviewers both, different perspectives on the matters raised. ●

When Things Start to Think

Neil Gershenfeld, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1999.

I wonder if it was a good idea to get a woman to review this book. I'm a little like Laura, one of the people Neil Gershenfeld dedicates this book to "who isn't impressed by gadgets". My sense of unease was heightened when I saw the picture of the wired baby on p 123. Intuitive reaction — the cyborg has arrived. So I approached this book with a sense of trepidation, fearing yet another rave about techno-wizzbangery, beating those of us with barely suppressed Luddite tendencies over the head once again. So bear in mind my biases when you read this review.

This is a book about that dynamic hub of high-tech wizardry, MIT's famous Media Lab, headed by the father of the digital promo, Nicholas Negroponte. The Media Lab is clearly a very exciting place indeed to work and Gershenfeld, one of their talented physicist researchers, gives us a flavour of what it is like to be part of it. Gershenfeld, writing lucidly for a general audience, considers the human-technology interface. He rightly recognises that technology should be for people rather than the other way round. In setting the scene for the book, he asserts that we should expect any new technology to do better than the one it is supposed to replace. He admits, for example, that an old-fashioned biro does a better job than a touch pad. He wants technology to improve our lives, become seamless and friendly, to take us into dimensions hitherto unthought of. He is as frustrated as the rest of us by computers that crash or intrude into our lives uninvited. His future technology is not a computer lurking on a desk. Instead it surrounds us; we wear it, we hang it on the wall and in our kitchens. We may even implant it in our brains. For Gershenfeld, the next interface for technology is the whole world. He mounts his case through this book by describing examples of the next generation of technological thinking — "when things start to think".

As well as the technological innovation, through this book you get a sense of the dynamic interplay at Media Lab between curiosity-based research, applications and development, of cutting edge interaction between top scientists and corporate chiefs. You also get a sense that Media Lab is solving some of the rigid organisational boundary problems suffered by much of academia through its views of how research and tertiary education should take place. At Media Lab the edges synergise well and creativity emerges. Media Lab uses flexible teams, and students are as much part of this as the experts. Their learning environment is the emerging context of the research as they become part of a research team, instead of being doomed to repeat experiments from bygone eras, the answers to which are already known. From this we can learn.

And it has to be said that the technology described is fascinating and at times awe-inspiring. The chapters of Gershenfeld's book describe different examples of these interfaces. Take, for example, Yo-Yo Ma's cello. Gershenfeld's team have attached sensors to the cello which allow Yo-Yo Ma to "control more sounds in more ways without sacrificing the centuries of experience reflected in its interface and his technique" (p 29). They are now working on developing a digital Stradivarius violin. Another chapter describes paper that changes its text while you watch, and, for me most amazing of all, there is the wearable computer. It seems there is a fellow called Steve Mann who goes around wearing a computer. He has cameras mounted in front of his eyes, and is able to read and write without looking away from what else he is doing. The computer monitors his heart rate and other body functions. It augments his memory by giving him his prior knowledge of the person he is talking to. This I found quite disturbing. It felt like another step towards nihilism, a harbinger of our yet further alienation in time and place, of even greater disconnection between one another and the natural world.

There are many other examples of Media Lab's thinking in this book — a medicine cabinet that monitors medicine consumption, a toilet which performs routine chemical analysis of urine (already available in Japan I believe), or, more sinisterly, a kitchen wired to your insurance company which lets it know if you are eating lettuce (good) or smoking a cigarette (bad). Your premium would be adjusted accordingly, your behaviour becomes a commodity. There is a good section on money, describing how it is being decoupled from being tied to atoms (material) and being coupled to bits instead.

The technology is of course fascinating. The ability of humans to invent and create these things is awesome. Some applications are sensible and welcome, and Neil Gershenfeld describes them all with a clear interdisciplinary knowledge and passion. Things That Think (TTT), reflected in the book's title, is actually the name given to a new consortium, created in 1995, of forty companies exploring "intelligence". Gershenfeld directs the aspect of TTT that develops materials and mechanisms that allow objects to sense, communicate and compute.

I found this another disturbing aspect of the book. Here is, as if we needed it, yet another example of how science has been co-opted by the corporation, and of this there is very little critique. I was left with the impression that for all its ingenuity, Media Lab is the handmaiden of the corporate world. I couldn't help asking: "Where are the social and environmental dimensions? Who benefits from this technology? Who decides what should be researched?" And as I digested the thrust of this book, I felt strangely excluded. Then it dawned on me that there was an almost total lack of women involved in the various projects described in the book. I counted them. There are nearly 100 men referred to, and only 4 women. Of these, only one, Lady Ada Lovelace, has anything to do with computers and that was in back in the 1830s. It was as if only half of humanity was having input into ideas that would clearly become the technologies of tomorrow.

To give him his due, in the last chapters Gershenfeld does reflect to some extent on the increasing divide between the techno haves and the have-nots. He is circumspect at times about where this is all heading, and is concerned about whether we will ever be persuaded to carry a chip implant to monitor our behaviour (remember the insurance company?) He worries about the terrifying spectre of genome editing. So do I. Greatly. It made me wonder — does Media Lab has an ethics arm? A philosophy arm? An equity and social justice arm? A sustainable development arm? Maybe Media Lab should hire more women. Or ask themselves why so few women are attracted to this work. I wonder if the same technologies would be developed if there were a critical mass of women? I cannot imagine a woman would invent a wearable computer. An organisation with such power and dynamism has enormous influence over the technology of the future and should be a real leader in working towards a future worth having. Or maybe they think they already are.

This book belongs firmly in the technofix view of the future, where the notion of progress remains unexamined, and technology is viewed as continuing to "improve" our lives. If you want to know what the world of High Tech has in store and what the people around it are thinking, read it and visit Media Lab's website to learn more about the projects described.

Meanwhile the guy wearing the computer still worries me. If he were my husband I'd tell him to stop being silly and take it off immediately. ●

Reviewed by: Caroline Smith

When Good Companies Do Bad Things

Peter Schwartz and Blair Gibb, Wiley, 1999.

What is the role of a corporation in society? Does it, indeed, have a role to play, or is it really just a vehicle for making money for its shareholders? Should a company get involved in wider social issues, or should it continue to operate based on the assumption that it somehow stands apart from society, leaving it to “someone else” to effect needed change?

When Good Companies Do Bad Things is a book about the emerging issue of corporate social responsibility in the global context. This book is, essentially, a wake-up call to business to get serious about its obligation to social issues. The authors’ agenda is to demonstrate to business managers that the very notion that a company somehow stands apart from society is not only wrong, but also positively dangerous to both its short-term and long-term viability. Business culture has tended to look somewhat askance at social issues as “soft” and unquantifiable, and therefore not in the “real world” of business. Schwartz and Gibb know that present-day business culture is most ready to pay proper attention to something if there is a risk of financial damage. Thus, they have structured much of their book around “real world” case studies demonstrating the extent to which failing to take account of social issues has had strong negative impacts both on companies and their employees. Some of the companies studied are Shell, Nestlé, Nike, Texaco, Exxon and Union Carbide. These companies were respected in their industries and highly regarded by their employees, and some regularly appeared in *Fortune*’s list of most admired companies. They were “good” companies — in most of the cases examined, these companies were acting in ways they themselves considered good, appropriate and legal. Yet, public opinion suddenly turned against them with a force they simply did not imagine.

This issue of corporate social responsibility is no longer simply a question of good business ethics; rather, it now has to do with an increasingly well informed public’s changing expectations of business on local, national and global scales. One of the effects of globalisation is an increasingly shared awareness across many different types of “public” and this pressure forces companies to consider their obligations to society more broadly than has previously been the case. In the past, certain business practices have been socially acceptable; now they are not. Business has always been subject to social values and attitudes. Today is no different. The public of today *expects* business to be more socially responsible, and companies that fail to discern this responsibility are increasingly at risk of public backlash. Thus, what was legal in the past is irrelevant. The *letter* of the law is no longer enough — it is its *spirit* which must be enacted. With increasing globalisation comes an increasing reliance by companies on maintaining a good reputation. We have all witnessed the power of the international media to mobilise millions of people overnight in response to perceived acts of corporate irresponsibility. A good reputation takes years to build, may be swept away overnight, and may take years to repair again, if at all.

Between them, Peter Schwartz and Blair Gibb have seen both sides of this dual question of corporate business strategy and social justice — Schwartz as a former head of scenario planning at Royal Dutch/Shell, Gibb as a former planning officer at Amnesty International’s headquarters, and both as members of GBN. While their book is a wake-up call to business about the reality of increased social responsibility for business, it is also about how to do something positive to respond pro-actively to the emerging changes in public opinion and create early-warning systems. The case studies not only deal with the crises these companies faced, but also with how they dealt with them, and what they learned in the process.

Beginning with an examination of what social responsibility means in the context of globalisation, and the various pressures it brings to the modern world of business, the book takes us on a historical tour of business as villain. Starting with the coffeehouse exchanges of the sixteenth century, the authors trace forward some brief histories of public response to business practices. Here they identify a cycle of social constraint on business. With increased success came greater visibility, resulting in public demands for accountability and transparency. Previously, this had been enforced by the legislative power of national governments. An important facet of globalisation is the erosion of national governmental power to regulate global corporations. This power vacuum is balanced by the rise of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), some of which are global in scope, such as the Red Cross and Greenpeace. In the past, companies and indeed whole industries have had to transform or die in response to public criticism, so social pressures are nothing new. The effects of globalisation have simply altered the nature and power of this criticism.

There then follow detailed case studies of today’s corporations. The common theme that emerges here is that traditional risk management is not enough. Traditional techniques are designed to think only the thinkable — each company was blind-sided by something that was, to them, *unthinkable*. Therefore, a shift is needed from risk management thinking to scenario thinking. In other words, a shift from a focus on what worked in the past, to a systematic focus on possible futures. One core element of this shift is to surface and re-examine underlying mental models, and the authors detail several steps in a process of re-perceiving social responsibility.

The complex new interactions of corporations and NGOs are examined next. The interesting outcome here is that corporations and NGOs, traditionally antagonists (for example, Shell and Greenpeace over the Brent Spar), may achieve much more satisfactory outcomes together in partnership than apart in adversity. The media meanwhile faces the challenge of re-perceiving this new dynamic in new positive terms instead of old clichés.

Several scenarios for the world of the next 20 years are presented, and some issues of the future are raised, such as cloning and genetically modified organisms. These chapters have the character of seeds designed to foment discussion, rather than answers to potential problems. Because the future is arriving faster than ever before, our ability to think in terms of many different possibilities is being stretched to the limit. How companies navigate these challenges will be scrutinised in ever more detail by an increasingly wired world.

The negative effects to a company arising from a pillorying in the press also manifest in the morale of its employees. The shock of going from business hero to social pariah often leads many employees to question their involvement with that company. *Fortune* magazine’s analysis of most-admired companies has shown that one of the most important aspects of the long-term viability of a company is the quality of employees it can recruit. If the best people choose not to work for a particular company because of its negative reputation, this can damage company performance for years. Thus, in finishing, the authors bring the discussion back to the personal level, and offer some personal “next steps” for re-perceiving our own assumptions of social responsibility, which sit alongside those offered earlier in the corporate context.

Schwartz and Gibb believe that the time for corporate social responsibility has arrived with a force unequalled in history. Unequalled, but not unprecedented. *When Good Companies Do Bad Things* is a book which asks a lot of questions, many of them difficult and all of them important. It is designed to start people thinking about emerging issues that will become increasingly important in the near future, both to society and business. In the end, the authors maintain, there is no real separation between the two. And, as they say (p 96), “history is ... a record of centuries of effort to improve or reform *something*... The modern corporation is no exception to this process and should not claim to stand apart from it.” Furthermore, (p 178) “when companies have not examined their operations *from a long-term perspective in a social context*, they are much more vulnerable to the type of bad things ... described in this book.” Ultimately, though, there is a considerable opportunity for companies to turn a social conscience into a distinctive competency, and to garner competitive advantage as a result. The bottom line is, then, if you will, that a genuine social conscience is actually good for business. ●

Reviewed by: Dr Joseph Voros

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