

RE-IMAGINING THE FUTURE

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OVERWHELMINGLY PEOPLE VIEW THE FUTURE IN TERMS OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE. Asked to imagine life in a hundred years time, they will talk about robots, computers, the exploration of space and so on. This way of thinking is the product, in part, of the scientific revolution that began in the early seventeenth century and which introduced the idea of cumulative knowledge and, therefore, inevitable change. More importantly, it is the product of the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century which demonstrated the power of this cumulative knowledge to transform the physical world.

We now take it for granted that the future will be radically unlike the past. That is what modernity is. Prior to the modern, scientific age, the idea would have been seen as eccentric in the extreme. The future then was the cyclical process of the seasons that brought you back to where you began. It was not, as it is now, a voracious, insatiable monster that devours the past.

It has, I think, taken some time for this fully to penetrate the popular imagination. Until quite recently it was held back by the belief that there were unchangeable constants in human life and society. These constants may be psychological or metaphysical, but, either way, they were opposed to the total transformations offered by technology. Now, however, people tend to accept – indeed to welcome – the certainty of complete change.

This has happened for a variety of reasons. Education now downgrades continuity in favour of progress. Technology itself, through mobile phones and the internet, now affects people at a very personal level, changing thought and behaviour rather than just offering convenience. Travel and mass communications have relativised local conceptions of continuity. The end of the Cold War has created a new model of world order in people's minds. And so on.

The implications of all this are open to speculation, as I say, it is only really a recent development. But there is one theme that is clearly emerging, the theme of belonging.

At the geopolitical level, the Cold War effectively maintained traditional politics. We were on one side and the Soviets were on the other. We may have resisted this idea but, whether we liked it or not, we belonged to our side. The terrorist attacks on America on September 11th revealed how far we have moved on from this essentially state-based model of conflict. The attackers fervently belonged in ways that we did not. Whereas we had become citizens of an affluent, mobile world, they wished to remain within the terms of a static and ancient confrontation. In order to face this threat, we had to turn

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our mobile world into a place to which it was possible to belong, a place with a view, not just bland, liberal tolerance. We had to say we were more right than the other side. This was highly confusing to people brought up on the idea of a benign, progressive globalisation and it exposed the problem of belonging in the affluent West.

This is directly related to secularisation. America, of course, remains a highly religious country, Britain and almost all other developed countries do not. But secularisation is not just a matter of churchgoing or religious profession, it is also a process whereby public discourse and institutions lose their Christian base. This may have been evident in a number of areas – religious education, the judiciary, even the way in which we discuss issues. I think it is now clear that Christianity is no longer the agreed or accepted foundation in any of these areas. Deprived of such a foundation, it becomes difficult to know to what, if anything, we belong.

Many find this an encouraging development. It will make us, they say, freer. But this is to deny one obvious human need, the need to belong. This need will not go away simply because scientists, technocrats and various progressives think it should. Rather, it will manifest itself in other ways. New Ageism, self-help, alternative therapies, internet “communities”, the anti-globalisation movement, single issue political groups, popular music and style are all new and thriving ways of belonging. They have the totality of religion and require the same degree of commitment. They are indicative of the human inability to live entirely in the uncommitted freedom of the technological rush into the future.

They are also isolated. Of course, any group must define itself, to some extent, in terms of those who do and do not belong. But if one lived in a Christian society – even one where few people actually go to church – it would be very difficult, in fact meaningless, to say one did not belong. One might not be a Christian but one would inevitably be drawn into the prevailing forms of thought and life. But these new post-religious religions are defined by their opposition to any such forms. This opposition may be deluded, it may be a new form of conformity, but it nevertheless provides the key to membership. There is, therefore, a huge difference between a religiously unified society – even if it is predominantly atheist – and a religiously fragmented society.

In the future this fragmentation may well go much further. I could be wrong about this, especially if external threats have the spectacularly unifying effect that they did in the

United States. But, assuming peace, affluence and secularity continue on their post-war course, then I think it is inevitable that we shall see a greater atomisation of society. The opposing desires to belong and, in secular terms, to be free will produce ever more disparate groupings and, as a result, ever more internal conflict. We have already seen how public debate has taken on the legalistic mode of conflicting absolutes – the *Today* programme and *Newsnight* are, in fact, forms of the future – this is likely to extend throughout human affairs. Terrorism is, in fact, one expression of this type of thinking.

For the moment, atomisation seems to be the only possible outcome of modernity and secularity. It should, of course, be resisted. Socially, it is destructive and, psychologically, it is catastrophic. It reduces the capacity of the individual to engage with the public realm. The further problem is that this same reduction also makes the individual all too vulnerable to, say, cults or sects and all too resistant to the idea of a broad, social good.

For me, the answer must lie in an escape from the obsession with the future that is merely technologically-inspired. Perhaps the least interesting or important thing about the future is the type of technology we shall be using. The most interesting thing is what kind of people we shall be. If we can focus on this, rather than the gadgets, then we might come up with some hopeful, or at least illuminating answers. ■