



Review of the Month - August 1999.

The Clock of the Long Now : time and responsibility.
Stewart Brand. Weidenfield & Nicolson

Not time's fool

We have for some time taken the view that something rich and strange is happening to the whole business of memory. In the cyber-era, it has seemed to us that individuals have a less obvious need for the power of personal recall. Consider all the mnemonic prostheses that now inhabit our culture and our commerce : data-banks; computerised records; massive stocks of phone, fax and e-mail numbers; search engines; lists and logs a go-go. If you forget a name, a face, a tune, a brand.....you can surely always find it, through some service, through some system. Why ever bother to try to remember detail and all its clutter? We, for our part, have mused on the odd potential of this phenomenon to de-skill and deplete individuals and render them dependent on all manner of hyper-convenient props and prompts.

Suck that thought for a moment as we lend our voice to the clamour of praise for *The Clock of the Long Now* : the best book on ethics and epistemology, on computing and clocks, on planning and profits we have read this year. Setting out to discuss the difficulties involved in the construction of a giant mechanical clock that measures our aeons rather than our hours, this becomes a dazzling piece of scholarship on how our society is being transformed by its reactions to technological innovation. In the rapids of this revolution, it's our grip on time-*measurement* that gives us our life-*management*. What a simple but deliciously liberating idea.

This is an age pregnant with new confusion. "Now that we have progress so rapid that it can be observed from year to year", says *The Clock*, "no-one calls it progress...Technology is treated as something that pushes us around rather than something we create. It's a bother, it's a boon, it's a discipline, it's a given". Moore's Law and Metcalfe's Law are but just understood before the effects they predict ratchet like spring traps through the daily lives of homes and businesses. How to maintain stability and civility, that sense of controlled motion where the past does not fade too quickly and the future does not come too soon? How to make oneself a true ally of a new zeitgeist : an earthed ally, a percipient ally, not at all an Ally McBeal? This is the question.

Forecasting as a commercial transaction enjoys low esteem. Detailed economic predictions, it has long been exposed, carry an utterly bogus promise of accuracy. Suppliers of grand macro-trends, elsewhere, seem to offer little more than a glorified cuttings service while even the respectable end of futurology slides all too readily down the clichés and into tabloid trivialisms. Being really good at the future requires a poet's imagination, a determination not to see things only through the prism - the prison? - of rigid academic disciplines or standard measurement techniques. We need those who can hear secret harmonies, those who - as Stewart Brand does here - can make strange and illuminating connections between the growth in the phenomenon of gambling and the sacking of the ancient library at Alexandria; those who can see metaphors in conifers or discourse on the meaning for all planners of the inner workings of Big Ben. *The Clock* is how social analysis and future prediction ought to be written. Provocatively, poetically.

...And with just enough scholarship to put a light ribbon around the arguments and not a ton of rigging (cf that tractatus of our tears, Fukuyama's *The Great Disruption*). The best example of this is the discourse called "Ending the Digital Dark Age", a review of how the pace of innovation in communications technology is creating new forms of cultural memory failure. "Never has there been a time of such drastic and irretrievable information loss" : data storage systems that degrade to the point of unreadability, obsolete or unpreservable discs, cyber-debris that no-one has the time to store accessibly. This is certainly a fresh take on the mnemonic prosthesis theory by which our individual dependence on machines can be seen to be deepening. What happens to us, we ask, when the effort is taken out of memory? When less is learned by rote and recall? When we can pay some system to literally re-collect the facts and figures to which we know we must, for our individual well-being, hold?

Stewart Brand spins a different question : "With the Net, preservation goes fractal : infinitely branched instead of centralized. Yet this leaves the question - Is the Net itself profoundly robust and immortal or is it the most ephemeral digital artifact of all?" His theory is that the digital age is dramatically shortening our collective attention span (a version, we guess, of our own concern) without creating a sufficient external order for knowledge to be retained and social balance to be preserved. It is a beautifully elaborated point.

We just love books like this. All pith and sinew and throb. The cyber age needs its philosophers just like any other. Our new technologies are doing quiet violence to standard perceptions of time and at the same moment inviting modern definitions of our responsibility as companies and citizens. Our first duty perhaps is to think clearly about the changes that the communications revolution have unleashed and recognise that how we respond / how we behave feeds inevitably, for good or ill, into the wider order that sustains us all. *The Clock of the Long Now* helps immeasurably in this very respect.

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