11 Forecasts of Trends in the Post-Industrial Society

TOM STONIER and PETER THORNTON

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Western society is experiencing a series of technological revolutions: hardly have we come to grips with one when the next one is already upon us. The combination of changes will produce a society in the next century as different from the Industrial Society of a hundred years ago, as that Victorian period differed from the Palaeolithic era.

By the end of the nineteenth century our great-grandparents had created a society whose level of economic productivity, and whose ability to shape the natural environment to human purposes, would have been the envy of Palaeolithic hunters. Actually, most of it would have been incomprehensible to our Stone-Age forebears. The Mechanical era had fostered a high industrial society which had created for the vast majority of its members a wholly artificial environment both physically and socially. Palaeolithic hunters would not have understood how people could live such sedentary lives in small family units in dwellings they would not have been able to construct, nor the working of the machines which transported them at terrifying speed. Nor would they understand why one would spend so much effort to put out huge numbers of men to kill each other with magic sticks which thundered death. What might have been even more incomprehensible is how the majority of men and women spent virtually no time whatsoever in hunting and gathering, and when they did, it was not on the fields or in the woods, but in another building down the street. Where did all that food come from?
It is not yet possible, in precise detail, to outline the society shaping up in the next century. However, one thing is becoming clear: the technological advances produced in this century propel us not only into a post-industrial period, but into a society so fundamentally different from the traditional industrial society of the past, that to find a comparable contrast we must go back tens of millennia to the Palaeolithic hunter–gatherers. During the past two decades we have moved into a new era whose economy no longer follows the rules of an industrial society. The tragedy is that most economists have not fully understood the significance of this change, while government leaders, and decision-makers in business and industry, frequently seem to act as if they were operating in total ignorance.

It is the purpose of this chapter to review the shift from the 'Mechanical' era into the 'Communicative' era, and to point to the driving mechanism of this shift, viz., the 'Electronic' revolution, and how this electronic revolution differed from the industrial revolution. The chapter then goes on to define the various features of the resulting post-industrial economy which is: (1) trans-national, (2) credit-based, (3) service-dominated, and (4) changing exponentially. The major economic problem in the 1980s is not going to be the rate of inflation so much as the massive unemployment generated by the accelerating displacement of labour by technology.

The major reason for the accelerating displacement of labour (as for the general exponential character of all the other socio-economic changes) is the electronics-based 'Information' revolution: By means of micro-electronic and related devices, the information revolution will not only transform all machinery into automated forms, but will affect the speed with which all sorts of problems can be solved. If the problem of the accelerating displacement of labour is not properly managed, Western society will be rent asunder by social and political forces which will make Europe look at the end of the 1980s as it did at the end of the 1920s.

Finally, the chapter looks at the growth of the knowledge industry, the rise of the information operatives, the need and logic of expanding society's database by expanding both education and R&D, and the increasing share of public service sector activity in all capitalist economies with education (in its broadest sense) becoming the number one industry. As we move deeper into this post-industrial, information society it will become axiomatic that an educated work-force learns to exploit new technology to its advantage, while an ignorant one becomes its victim. Nowhere is this truism more applicable than for the managerial work-force.