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Technological Futures and the Technical Fix

‘Taken as a whole, benefits of this kind constitute what I would call mythinformation: the almost religious conviction that a widespread adoption of computers and communications systems along with easy access to electronic information will automatically produce a better world for human living.’

(Langdon Winner, 1986, p. 105)

Introduction

It is surely beyond question that Britain today faces formidable difficulties. At the forefront of public concern is the unprecedented level of unemployment, which is particularly acute among young people. Compounding this are regional imbalances that manifest the problem of worklessness, but which also extend far beyond this as ‘deindustrialisation’ takes its toll. Coal, steel, shipbuilding and manufacture continue their remorseless decline and with these industries goes a whole way of life. Underlying these trends is a deep-seated international recession which is having the effect of tightening competitive pressures, to which Britain does not seem able to adequately respond. The upshot is an apparently inexorable economic collapse, still further unemployment and bleak prospects for the future. On top of this, such is the internationalisation and integration of economic affairs mediated by gigantic transnational corporations and inter-state agencies, that people commonly sense their destinies – and that of their own nation – as being beyond their control.
As if this were not enough, in the inner cities are trapped what is increasingly solidifying as an underclass, composed disproportionately of racial minorities and the transient young. This class is burdened by a cumulation of disadvantages in housing, jobs and education. This class’ expressions of discontent are evidenced in high crime rates, broken families, vandalism and, more frightening and prophetic, intermittent rioting and looting. Shrouding even this, and indeed all else, is the new Cold War and the widespread apprehension that a nuclear holocaust may terminate human existence. On a lesser scale, post Chernobyl and Three Mile Island, most people realise that nuclear power entails huge risks for the environment.

The chronicle could be extended, but this description is sufficient to highlight the fact that we learn from opinion surveys that the public is distinctly glum about the future (Heald and Wybrow, 1986, p. 251).

Since empirical analysis reveals that control is moving further away from the individual citizen as well as from once sovereign nations, and that crises are intensifying and cumulating, we should not find the public mood remarkable. What we do find astonishing, however, is that in the present period one regularly encounters a strain of opinion, loud and persistent, which adopts an almost messianic faith in the future. Far from being anxious about what is looming on the horizon, there are those who envisage the year 2000 as a time of super abundance, contentment and social harmony. They look forward to the future with enthusiasm and unalloyed utopianism. One of them, Professor Tom Stonier, peers from the windows of the local university and sees far beyond the ruins of Bradford’s textile mills to an era in which ‘everyone [is] an aristocrat, everyone a philosopher’, where ‘authoritarianism, war and strife’ will have been eliminated, and where

For the first time in history, the rate at which we solve problems will exceed the rate at which they appear. This will leave us to get on with the real business of the next century. To take care of each other. To fathom what it means to be human. To explore intelligence. To move out into space. (Stonier, 1983, p. 214)