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Book Reviews

The Evolution of Future Consciousness: The Nature and Historical Development of the Human Capacity to Think About the Future

Thomas Lombardo
AuthorHouse (June 23, 2006)
452 pages (paperback)
ISBN-10: 1425944469
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and

Contemporary Futurist Thought: Science Fiction, Future Studies, and Theories and Visions of the Future in the Last Century

Thomas Lombardo
AuthorHouse (June 23, 2006)
444 pages (paperback)
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reviewed by Bengt-Arne Vedin

These two books constitute a remarkable achievement. They are introduced by reviews of experts who have seen the manuscripts, and the present reviewer could do worse than recycling some of their applause. 'Awesome' is a word that comes easily, and heroic must substitute foolhardy as the author concludes his ambitious project, 'encyclopedic' accurately describing the scope and the bringing together of a plethora of disciplines requiring the reviewer to be a team rather than one single individual.

The great Swedish author Lars Ahlin wanted his novels, his language to engage the latent language of the reader. This is something that Lombardo succeeds in also, a real achievement. It implies that the present reader has some queries to add, and some objections. Since future consciousness has a lot to do with time (circular vs. linear), a recurrent theme, of which Augustine famously claimed that he knew precisely what time is, until someone asked for an explanation of it – well, he spotted the paradox.

Do not make the mistake that I did before reading, to believe that the two books are similar and different only in the periods they cope with. Much to his credit, Dr Lombardo has produced, with the same overarching theme of thinking about the future, two distinctly different tomes.

The first two chapters of *The Evolution of Future Consciousness* were for me the most productive in that they provided new perspectives, founding future consciousness – the lens working so amazingly well throughout the first book – in basic human psychology (Lombardo held a chair in psychology and philosophy when embarking on the project). He even proposes that the ability and the tendency to take the future into account is what make us human – an inspiring idea. The time perspective has to do with values and ethics, with self-identity and with seeing holistically. Chapter Two deals with the emergence of human culture, which Lombardo, following a number of researchers, describes as an entangled net of reciprocities. It is the dualisms between culture and nature, men and women, the will of winning versus altruism, humans versus higher beings, trade and exchange, predator–prey: evolution’s Red Queen effect. Heraclitus is contrasted with Parmenides, Plato integrating the two.

In the first volume, Lombardo is relying heavily on Leonard Schlain, with Howard Bloom as runner-up. One criticism is that the author has a blind spot for Europe; Ramon Llull, Arnaud de Villanova, Giordano Bruno, and Nostradamus have gone missing, to name a few; Frances Yates might have served as a useful introductory. The remaining two chapters in this book deal with belief and science, that is, the evolution of religion and myth and of scientific thinking and the enlightenment. I found these parts less original but no less indispensable; the novelty is, again, that lens of future consciousness. Even Taoism and Zoroastrianism are included, and rightly so; Manicheism and Gnosticism are not, and I’m not the one to argue, though this is one of several occasions where I lack a discussion of the what’s and why’s to skip.

The second book, the ‘contemporary’ one, starts out with a grand tour of science fiction – very, very broad in scope, and lucid in its discussion. Sure, I found, for example Zamyatin and Philip Kerr missing, and though I share Lombardo’s appreciation of Farmer’s *Riverworld* series, does that have anything much to do with the future? Again, some more of a discussion on problems and criteria for what to include might have served well.

The one chapter where I found the US perspective most troubling was the one on contemporary futurists with an impact. No Gabor, no Jantsch, Zwicky, Gaston Berger, Thierry Gaudin, Sohail Inayatullah; the Club of Rome is mentioned (for the Limits to Growth study) but not Peccei or King. American John L Casti would have provided useful insights making the discussion on (deterministic, an important qualifier) chaos and complexity (and catastrophe, to boot) less blunt. I would have put more emphasis on futurist thinking grounded in technological forecasting but am grateful for an alternative approach.

The concluding chapter contains a breathtaking and thoroughly up-to-date analytical recap of a large number of essays – books – on the future. Lombardo seems to subscribe to the notion that *now* is a unique point in civilization’s development; that chronocentric view seems to have colored all times, but then, he refers to the likes of Toffler and Kurzweil. Again, the reader might miss a few potential references (I, for one, Casti and Gaudin) but that is because Lombardo has taken upon himself an impossible task; the reader must be grateful for all this food for thought, and if she on her own discovers that there are links between – e.g., de Chardin’s Omega Point and the Internet – that goes only to prove that Lombardo has opened vistas for exploration. An important contribution is the organized tabulations of various types of discourses, theories, and models.

To sum up, I could do worse than quoting from Wendell Bell’s praise on the cover of the second volume: “A great book... a must-read book for futurists... a masterpiece...” applying it on both tomes.