

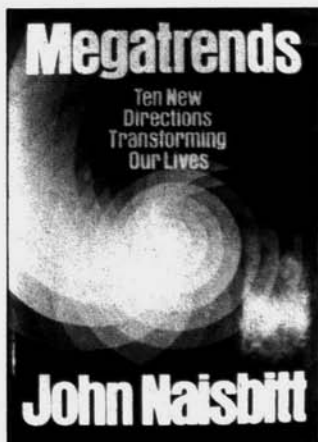
Megatrends: Megahype, Megabad

Naisbitt's bestselling *Megatrends* is "conceptually indefensible and statistically unreliable."

LOUIS GOLDMAN

An elitist old professor of mine once claimed that if a book became a best-seller it was almost sure to be an inferior piece of work. High sales, he argued, meant that many people who don't ordinarily read would have to be attracted to it, and the book would necessarily be overly simplistic, devoid of nuance, and generally sensationalistic. John Naisbitt's megaselling book *Megatrends* conforms to the old professor's dictum. Naisbitt's intention, of course, is worthy. In this confusing, changing world we can surely use reliable road maps to the future, and he gives us ten superhighways to tomorrow. But, to change the metaphor, Naisbitt is forced to paint a huge canvas, and his technique at times resembles Seurat's pointillism—if you make enough points (by citing statistics), the picture soon emerges. At other times the technique is a more expressionistic finger painting—if a picture does emerge, it's pretty messy. *Megatrends* is conceptually indefensible and statistically unreliable.

Naisbitt is an unwitting slave to a hidden metaphor: the ubiquitous nature, growth, or development metaphor that Robert Nisbet dissected so adroitly in *Social Change and History*. A *trend*, after all, is the early stage of a later development. It implies a cluster of identifiable phenomena that has its own internal logic, an *entelechy* guiding its growth. And once we get hooked on the metaphor of growth, we inevitably speak of birth, development, maturity, death, and, perhaps, rebirth. Often the comparison is not with organic life, but with other natural cycles; we speak of sunrise, high noon, and sunset. Like noon-time, a midpoint in any process may be measured against everything else, which is either in the ascendancy or descendancy. Various stages are identified and,



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taking the cue from natural growth, are seen to be irreversible. Hence Naisbitt shares his metaphysics of history with a notable tradition, including Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and numerous other rise-and-fall histories.

Examples abound: "World business matured beyond its economic prime" (p. 57). "We have two economies today: a sunrise economy and a sunset economy" (p. 71). Naisbitt's remarkable tauology, "It is too late to recapture our industrial supremacy because we are no longer an industrial economy" (p. 56), can only be understood within the context of an irreversible-stages-of-growth metaphor. It is but a small step to Moliere's statement that opium puts us to sleep because of its dormitive properties.

A further consequence of the growth metaphor is the concept of the homeostasis of the organism. Old cells are constantly dying and being replaced by new cells; some are in ascendancy and others in descendancy. Hence the first nine chapters of the book are a series of oppositions: "Short Term—Long Term," "North—South," "Industrial Society—Information Society." Perhaps nothing can better convey my frustration with this book than the title of the tenth chapter, "Either/Or—Multiple Option." We are in an Esher world with concepts turning upon and devouring themselves. Equally apt is Leacock's character who "flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions," or the old conundrum of the book that ends with the statement, "Nothing you have read in this book is true."

Perhaps the particular version of stage theory that needs closest examination today is the "Industrial Society—Information Society" dichotomy, which begins the book and is shared by other contemporary "trendies" such as Jean Jacques Servan-Schrieber in *The World Challenge*, Alvin Toffler in *The Third Wave*, and a host of others. This concern has important implications for understanding our present economic crisis and for devising retraining, investment, and foreign trade policies, among others.

State Theorists like Naisbitt make two related errors: (1) they reify some constructs (industrial society or information society) and act as if these entities are mutually exclusive; and (2) they endow

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these entities with a life cycle of birth-development-death. Let us examine each of these errors.

First, the argument of the State Theorists is that we have gone from an agricultural to an industrial (and now) to an information society. "Farmer, laborer, clerk—that is a brief history of the United States," writes Naisbitt, because "in 1979, the number-one occupation in the United States, numerically, became clerk, succeeding laborer, succeeding farmer" (p. 14). Having established the arrival of the third stage by counting noses, Naisbitt seems to be saying we should focus all our energies on the clerical-information sector and should not focus on, to use the jargon, the "sunset industries." Naisbitt and the other information-society trendies, captivated by the growth metaphor, view the stages of growth as mutually exclusive entities. The analogy is that we can't, or shouldn't, be adolescents and adults at the same time. Obviously this is pernicious nonsense. A sounder analogy would be with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy—although we go from satisfying basic bodily needs to social needs to spiritual needs, we never cease requiring

satisfaction of the lower needs. Concluding that we will abandon industries to Japan (who will abandon them to South Korea and Brazil) because we are numerically an information society is an abuse of the use of statistics.

Naisbitt and others allege that farmers are about 3 percent of the work force. But what is the number if we speak of agricultural workers? Surely, all of the workers at International Harvester and John Deere must be classified as being in the agricultural sector. What of the producers of chemical fertilizer and all of the petroleum workers who provide the raw material for fertilizer? And all of the workers who process food and all of the truckers who transport it? And what of the accountants and lawyers who serve them? Clearly, it is a vast oversimplification to count noses and say we moved from an agricultural to an industrial to an information society. We are a mixed society. Our agriculture depends more and more on our industry, which depends more and more on information. But our information and our industry, in turn, depend upon our agriculture. Yes, the computer is here and will do big things to and for our society. There is a new kid on the block; does that mean all the old ones should move out?

Second, having established his "industrial society" and "information society" as living entities, Naisbitt assumes that one society is dying or is in its descendancy, since the newer society is ascendant. But American steel and auto production has not declined because of hardening of the arteries. Those industries have become uncompetitive because we have not modernized our factories and because our labor costs are about double those of the Japanese. And the Japanese may "de-industrialize" not because they are growing older, but because labor costs in South Korea and Brazil are lower than theirs, and they are becoming uncompetitive.

When and if the American wage structure is commensurate with the rest of the world (or vice versa) and American management takes the long-range view and invests in capital improvements, rather than striving for profits that yield managerial bonuses, we will surely see a re-industrialization of America that makes us competitive again.

Megatrends is further marred by fad-

dish jargon (such as "information float," "high-touch," "sunrise industries"), a poor bibliographic format, irritating spelling errors (wholistic, bussing), egregious statements ("And Florida housed the metropolitan center with the largest population rate increase, Fort Myers-Coral Gables, which grew by 95 percent during the 1970's," p. 219), and statistical error and distortion ("53 percent of the people voted. Forty-eight percent did not").

Naisbitt's information and interpretation—about education in particular—makes one cringe. He tells us that "Holt estimated there were at least 10,000 families educating their children at home" several years ago and that "in 1982 the figure was estimated at one million" (p. 144). Who made this latter estimate? In the February 1983 *Phi Delta Kappan*, Holt himself states that "the actual number of families who have chosen not to send their children to school is hardly more than ten or fifteen thousand."¹ Extrapolations like

this could quickly put the trendies out of business.

To support his contention that "our education system is turning out an increasingly inferior product" (p. 19), Naisbitt cites increasing drop-out rates in California and in several Northeastern and industrial Midwestern cities (p. 32), but does not mention that the number of ninth through twelfth graders in school increased nationally from 88.4 percent in 1970 to 92.1 in 1980. The drop-out rate from 1968 through 1980 is remarkably stable, fluctuating between 25.6 percent and 25 percent.² The anomaly of growing drop-out rates in these places can be easily explained by Naisbitt's own data elsewhere in *Megatrends*: "During the 1970's, California's Anglo population declined from 89 to 76 percent" (p. 219). Minority populations typically have higher drop-out rates. Similarly, "Urban symbols of the industrial North—Buffalo, Cleveland, and St. Louis—lost nearly one-quarter of their population during the 1970's"

(p. 109). The lost population tends to be lost not only to the sunbelt, but to the suburbs with the "white flight" of the more affluent, leaving the metropolitan centers with larger percentages of minorities with higher drop-out rates.

The most interesting thing about *Megatrends* is that it became a best-seller. This may be a barometer of the anxiety many people feel toward the future, and it may encourage more responsible authors to engage in futuristics without the megahype, megadistortions, and megawish-fulfillments that abound in *Megatrends*. □

¹John Holt, "Schools and Home Schoolers: A Fruitful Partnership," *Phi Delta Kappan* (February 1983): 392.

²W. Vance Grant and Leo Eiden, *Digest of Educational Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics, 1982), p. 15.

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