

Book review

Post-industrial age will 'dislocate' Canadians

By REGINALD STUART
 Americans insist that rather than await what tomorrow brings, they can make of it what they will. This optimism explains the array of future-oriented cults, sects, fixations, literature and consultants, including astrologers, that litter the United States.

Marvin Cetron, of Forecasting International, and Omni science writer Owen Davies have produced *American Renaissance: Our Life at the Turn of the 21st Century* (McClelland and Stewart, 320 pages, \$26.95), in the tradition of *Future Shock* and *Megatrends*. They argue that, current despair and woe notwithstanding, the United States will be a richer, happier society by 2000.

Canadians can profit from this book, despite its American focus. The increase of women in the workforce, growing cultural diversity, computerization, growth of service and decline of manufacturing industries, the aging of our populations, changing family values and many other trends apply equally to both countries.

The sections on science and technology have a "gee-whiz" quality, but only *The AIDS Plague* bogs down in technicalities. To take the two themes, the conclusions about the impact of robotics and computers for social, economic and political realms are compelling. Unions will shrink as workers disperse to "commute" by electronics instead of automobiles. And demand will quicken for the technical skills that have emerged over the past decade.

DISLOCATION

Canadians and Americans will suffer dislocations during this march into the post-industrial age. Blue-collar workers, farmers and middle-managers who lose jobs may never find equivalent employment.

The authors whistle to keep their courage up at times. They are pessimistic about the innovative skills of American manufacturers, for example, citing the history of transistor and video technology. And every piece of good news has its dark side. Smoother global trade will accompany the increasing power of multinational corporations and regional blocs.

Our wonder technology will be

easy prey for special interest terrorists. Miracle health care is enormously expensive and ailing elders may be denied treatment in favor of the productive young, as is the case in Britain today.

Students should read the sections on changing employment patterns. Millions of new jobs will require advanced skills. Current high-schoolers should consider a broadly-based humanities, scientific and technical education into college levels. Otherwise, they may wallow in electronic sweatshops, tapping keyboards with little hope of advancement. And the rhythm of schooling will shift toward life-long patterns, rather than immersion of the young.

Other forecasts draw from daily headlines. Tax reform, if rendered politically palatable, should allow each country to cope with its deficit incubus. Finance Minister Michael Wilson's general sales tax is a cousin of the Value Added Tax the authors believe will come to the United States. Both nations have a rising environment activism, conundrums related to scientific development and a growing day-care lobby of working parents, single or otherwise.

Canadians will pale at the prospect of national dissolution. The authors venture that disenchanted western Canada may well secede before Quebec insists on its own independence. A Canadian-American merger would build upon current economic interaction, but not really benefit either country beyond that, they add. Will we end with a whimper, not a bang? If so, we are surely worth more than four states on a redesigned American flag.

The comments on Canada form a small part of this book, but reflect ambiguous American images about our country. On the one hand, we seem stable, affluent, similar. On the other hand, we are centrifugal, envious of American plenty (or low consumer prices), strident about our differences.

WILD CARDS

This is a short-range future history, even though the authors make no attempt to chronicle events over the next decade. History has a way, however, of confounding forecasters, whose reputations usually rest on one or two decent stabs in a sea of earnest nonsense. Wild cards always lurk in the shadows.

The authors' portrait of American society in the year 2000 rests on beliefs about change over time. The forecasts vary in reasonableness and one wonders how deep into society any of these trends will penetrate.

Cetron and Davies may have become intoxicated by their imaginations. The final section on values is little more than a pastiche of modern living columns from weekend magazines. And their argument about turn-of-the-century creativity betrays all the intellectual rigor of cocktail-party chatter.

That said, this book is an informative and stimulating read.


Amidst the gloom about drugs, economic depression, social turmoil, uneducated graduates and politicians who eschew leadership for popularity, a profession of faith in the strength of the American character is refreshing.

Canadians would surely

welcome a revived, happier United States by the year 2000, just as we would shrink from a grasping global colossus. Even across the border, we have a stake in that society, like it or not. And Cetron and Davies are right, it seems to me. The merits of forecasting aside, we must tackle our problems and try to manage, rather than merely suffer history.

—Reginald C. Stuart is the Dean of Humanities and Sciences at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, N.S.

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