

BOOKSHELF

Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives

John Naisbitt

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According to Naisbitt we are in the "Time of the Parenthesis: The Time Between Eras" meaning that America has bracketed off the present from the past and the future. We are in a time of ambiguity, a time of changing and questioning. The author, a social forecaster and president of his own futuristic corporation — the Naisbitt Group, broadly outlines 10 major trends that portend the future. Based on current trends, he forecasts that we are moving from: (a) an industrial to a communication-based economy; (b) a manufacturing intensive labor force to a high tech labor force balanced with an emphasis on human values, motivation and, perhaps, religion; (c) a short-term to a long-term social and economic philosophy; (d) economic isolation to global economic interdependence; (e) centralization to decentralization; (f) reliance on institutional help to self-(grassroots) help; (g) representative democracy to participatory democracy; (h) dependence on hierarchical institutional structures to informal social/economic networks; (i) from the Northeast to the South and West leaving behind the old industrial cities; and (j) a society with limited options to one with multiple social, cultural and economic options. In essence, America is moving from a hierarchically structured and quasi-stagnate to a grassroots restructured and dynamic society.

The maxium of the book is "the most reliable way to anticipate the future is by understanding the present." Naisbitt's trend analysis is based on localized data bases gleaned from the content analysis of more than 2 million articles and reports about local events in U.S. cities and

towns over a 12 year period. The basis of his analysis is the "force-choice theory" in which societies add new pre-occupations and forget old ones. The Naisbitt Group keeps track of these societal trends and "measures the changing share of the market that competing societal concerns (interests) command."

Unlike Cetron in *Encounters with the Future*, who based his predictions on social/economic trends in Sweden, Naisbitt used California, Florida, Washington, Colorado and Connecticut as bellwether states. California gave us ethnic pluralism, changes in life style (physical fitness, human potential groups), and Proposition 13 (government decentralization). Colorado initiated "sunset laws" and "managed population growth" legislation. Connecticut and Washington, respectively, were the first states to elect female governors. Connecticut, along with Florida, were leaders in requiring minimum competency testing for high school students. Connecticut also initiated the nation's first "right-to-know" laws on the job hazardous substances, laws prohibiting the firing of whistle blowers, and the elimination of minimum utility charges for the poor. Seattle was the first city to outlaw mandatory retirement. Florida started the condo and time-shared vacation boom and initiated "sunshine laws," requiring open meetings. The author predicts Florida will surpass California as the bellwether state for social invention for the nation.

This "parenthesis" stage, according to Naisbitt, calls for nothing less than a total reconceptualization of America's social roles. There are cities, companies, institutions, unions, and political parties that are like dinosaurs waiting for the weather to change. The weather is not going to change. But the very ground is shifting beneath society. This shift will change the way we perceive education and employment.

Universities and public schools with substantial fiscal cutbacks and resources, shifting pupil populations, and changing program needs are link-

ing up with corporations and businesses for joint education ventures. Corporations have taken to training entry and current personnel rather than rely on outside institutions. Over 300 corporations now operate remedial courses in basic math and English for entry-level workers. Education is no longer completed by high school or college education, but involves lifelong education and retraining. Increasingly Americans will begin to disengage from institutions and take action on their own. With the drop in SAT scores and declining quality of public education, parents and the business community have become disillusioned with handing the total responsibility of their children's education over to the schools. In a 1979 Gallup Poll on education, 50% of adults believed themselves better educated than young people, while only 25% thought young people were better educated.

Parent activism which began in the 1970's has transformed into self-help by parents seizing "control of the education process by creating their own schools." Entrepreneurs are showing that "it doesn't take elaborate facilities, credentialed, degreed, certified teachers and mammoth salaries to give children a good education." While starting your own school was popular in the 1970's, home education appears to be the trend for the 1980's which now involves as many as 100,000 children. The use of packaged home-school (Calvert School Home Study) and self-help programs (Families Learning Together) appear to be on the increase.

The centralization to decentralization and institution-help to self-help trends in education will be accelerated by Reagan's education tax credit and voucher proposal. The shift from an industrial to an informational society has created a gap between the product of the schools and society's needs. Science and math programs in the U.S. schools lag behind the Russians, Japanese and Germans. Part of the problem is the shortage of qualified high school science and math teachers. Naisbitt does not see a bright future

for public education and the inferior product being turned out by the schools. At a time when corporations are demanding more highly skilled workers, "what they are getting are graduates who would have a hard time qualifying for the jobs that are already technologically obsolete." However, there will be an increasing demand for teachers to tutor students with jobs in private business and a growing market for educational consultants, according to Naisbitt.

The author is uncertain as to the effect of computers on the educational achievement of students. It could open other education options. "Schools are beginning to realize that in the information society, the two required languages will be English and computer."

Naisbitt forecasts that by 1990 blacks and Spanish-speaking Americans will be the largest ethnic groups in the U.S. The question of bilingual education will be settled in favor of

Spanish-speakers. We will be a bilingual country before the year 2000. The myth of the melting pot has failed and pluralism will be in. With the increasing wave of immigrants of diverse cultural backgrounds, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and global education will be an integral part of urban school curricula.

Ethnic diversity will have an impact on local communities: 18% of Aurora, Illinois population is Latino; 120 Laos Hmong tribesmen reside in Selma, Alabama and two thousand Tai Dam, Asian tribesmen have settled in Iowa. "The increasing number of ethnic-groups will not only give Americans a strong sense of their ethnic culture but enrich and enhance the options in American society."

By the collective monitoring of local events and behavior, Naisbitt paints with a broad brush stroke events that he feels will define a new American society. This era of instability and uncertainty is a "great and

yeasty time filled with opportunity." He advises that if we can make uncertainty our friend, we can achieve more than in stable eras. On the other hand, the author does not predict the shape or specific events of the new society.

Megatrends contains a wealth of information and an annotated bibliography on the underlying forces that have been transforming our society and that will shape our future. This book is essential reading for those responsible for policy decisions regarding the current and future needs of American society. It would be of particular interest to educators in policy making positions. This era of "parenthesis" may be an opportune time for the public schools to reconceptualize their goals and restructure the curricula and programs to take advantage of these megatrends. "Trends, like horses, are easier to ride in the direction they are already going."

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