Future Shock
by Alvin Toffler
(Random House; 430 pp.; $8.95. Bantam Book; 565 pp.; $1.95)

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Alvin Toffler's Future Shock is noteworthy not only for its argument bearing on technology and culture but as a cultural event. Portions of this work by an editor of Fortune passed through Horizon, Redbook, and Playboy on the way to a Random House hardcover edition, which went through fifteen printings in less than a year before becoming a Bantam Book available on every bookstand and drug counter. Early editions were advertised as "being talked about by Betty Friedan, Marshall McLuhan, Richard Nixon, and Buckminster Fuller"; the paperback is still being mentioned by both guests and hosts on the talk shows. Projections and proposals from many sources were here packaged for a waiting, apprehensive, and appreciative public. That readership merits reflection no less than—and alongside—the substance of the book.

A roaring vortex of technological change is, as Toffler puts it, racing, hurtling, arrowing, and, above all, accelerating through the society, producing the second, or at most the third, great era in civilization: super-(not post-) industrialism. If we count out history in eight hundred lifetimes, print has been known only in the last six, electricity in the last two, most material goods only in the last one. Half the energy consumed by men in the past two thousand years was actually consumed in the last hundred. At a growth rate of 5-10 per cent annually, production doubles in fifty years. "Facts" of an addable, storable, usable sort ("the fuel of technology") will increase fourfold before the child born today graduates from college, thirty-twofold by the time he is fifty; at his death, 97 per cent of all accumulated knowledge will have been the product of his own lifetime. The resulting technology makes increasingly disposable many items of social relationships, things, places, organizations, and ideas. Such change knows no geographical boundaries and produces universal history.

Needless to say, people are feeling shock—not least the reader. But, while his language does not lend itself to making evaluations, Toffler is able to describe those who take to technological change and "crest its waves joyfully." They are trained people (the "brain drain" came from Europe not merely to acquire dollars but to "live faster") and executives who move freely—"advance agents of man, the earliest citizens of the worldwide super-industrial society now in the throes of birth." Those who don't take to it, seek flight from it, "never do adjust adequately," are likely to be older people (and some confused young), untrained (or traditionalists with "Rousseauite romanticism" or "Luddite paroxysms"), "mournful" ruralists who cling to the land (remaining victims of the "tyranny of geography") or preserve at tachments to cottages like those depicted in "cloying" English poetry. Toffler does not mean to be overly evaluative. His argument is that technological advance is here to stay and that, for the most part, "those who can adapt will." His is not the cynical argument that, since we can't beat it, we would do well to join it. Most people like what technology is able to produce, and only partly because they have been induced to do so.

New technological output results in a multiplication of choices which, Toffler asserts, "extends the range of freedom" and entails "greater opportunities for self-realization" than ever before. He refers not only to large-scale possibilities (sea cities, cyborgs, fabricated men) but also to psychic pleasures which can be added to products or which can be directly induced. What, then, does Toffler recommend for the malaise of "future shock"? He has made a remarkable survey of social science laboratories for present or anticipated techniques of measuring stress and adaptability, which not only help discover limits of tolerable change but might also help enlarge them. In addition to supportive therapies and withdrawal communities, he points to education which, once freed from older static conceptions, might serve to increase people's "copability" through formation of anticipatory images and techniques of information handling. Similarly, public programs can be subjected to devices which monitor environmental and social equilibrium. Societal decisions can be facilitated through the invention of diversified scientific futures. (Hippies, theologians, and interdisciplinary groups imagine futures which technologists test for feasibility.) Toffler joins those who believe the media will make it possible to "go to the people" as never before with alternative proposals. Media-held "social future assemblies" will ventilate proposals which might otherwise have stayed behind closed doors.

What Toffler has done is to raise the question of technological development in language characteristic of highly schooled, highly employed Americans. His syntax is itself empiricist and technological in its treatment of "knowledge" as hard data, "freedom" as choices, and evaluation as votes. There is a welcome absence of any talk about noncumulative sorts of knowledge or intractable accumulations of power. But, precisely for that reason, a question arises whether this book is not part and parcel of trends which have brought the society to certain impasses, and whether its chief effect (especially in view of its large and gratified readership) is not to enforce those trends.

Toffler's language remains remarkably impervious to considerations raised by other commentators on technology, freedom, and public decision. Though he treats technological advance as a virtual given and defines knowledge as the "fuel of technology," Toffler is not led to ask whether human intervention and invention are not thereby proscribed. Jacques Ellul is chided as a "technophobe," but the well-known argument of The Technological Society is not considered: i.e., the extent to
which technology tends to augment itself (as side effects and fallout set new problems), interlock (for example, as production requires marketing and planning techniques), and roll on in a quite amoral way (there was no way to nuclear energy except through the bomb).

"Facts" are not simply given; they are, as the word itself implies, "made." A culture is characterized by the facts which it values and by its valuations which are facts. Is there no connection between the defense budgets for research and development during the past generation and the circumstance that there are more scientists today than previously since Adam? Toffler is without any explanation for the fact that the steam engine of Hero of Alexandria remained a toy, that the conic sections of Apollonius were not applied for two thousand years, that Archimedes smashed his machine and Leonardo refused to allow production of his inventions. ("Today such delays are almost unthink-able.") Toffler's assumptions tend to leave us with a "tyranny of facts": with a past from which we cannot learn, a present in which we cannot intervene through the formation of facts and judgments, and a future full of terror—admittedly, more terror for some than for others.

Multiplication of products and modules (forty-four varieties of Mustang) no doubt give more freedom of a sort, but the new choices lie between parallel lines set by technological feasibility and marketability—as Marcuse described in One-Dimensional Man. Are we free to decline Mustangs, even in the face of accumulated evidence that every increase in automotive speed lengthens the time we spend in getting from place to place where we want to be, and diminishes the number of places there are to go on the whole? It may be asked whether our very tastes are not adapting to the necessities of mass production."

Playboy or achieved with a vibrator. If, as Toffler admits, psychologically loaded merchandise "blurs the line between dad and product," and psychologically induced pleasures blur the line "between illusion and reality," who then is being "escapist"—the man who resists such masturbatory awareness or the man who "crests" it? The point is that Toffler's language affords no firm criteria or priorities for making such choices—though such rationalities are included by Marcuse and others in the very conception of freedom.

Many of Toffler's practical proposals seem a straight-faced linkage of material and human technologies like that against which Ellul warned: "It is precisely the need to diagnose and cure this disease [Future Shock!] that is offered as both justification and demand for the creation of new human techniques." In contemplating the cooptability of educational functions, it gives pause to note how specific suggestions dropped along the way by Everett Reimer and Ivan Illich (an end of factory-model schools, a call for parental and neighborhood instruction) reappear in Toffler's proposals—though the parents and neighborhoods he names are "near Santa Monica, California, where the RAND Corporation has its headquarters, in the research belt around Cambridge, Massachusetts, or in such science cities as Oak Ridge, Los Alamos or Huntsville." Let the reformer beware! In the end, Toffler allows the burden of decision to rest with private imagination and "social future assemblies" without any tradition to focus their discussion or any language with which to pursue it.

Victor Ferkiss, in Technological Man: The Myth and the Reality, remains unsnared by generalizations about "mass man" and insists on the power of human intervention in technological development. But he is never so bold as to venture that, merely by extension of previous attitudes, people will pose appropriate futures or choose well among them. What began for Ferkiss as a study of "technology and politics" issued in a call for philosophic changes which will focus new norms with respect to nature and man's function within it and will issue restrictions on altering the human organism before we learn what it can accomplish in its present form once liberated from hunger, fear, and ignorance.

Toffler is more shocking, less demanding. He draws no lines against increasing material desires as such, which leads invariably to increasing divisions in the society. His projections do not include mass starvation for lack of resources shortly after the turn of the century. Perhaps he is talking about a more distant future; but he pretends to be talking about the next years, and those are the years of his readers. Occasionally a paragraph names present poverty and scarcity as presenting projects which might slow the present technological onrush, but it seems those paragraphs were inserted as an afterthought. "You can't say I haven't thought about that"—then the argument resumes, as though it had not been touched—or invalidated.

A richer language seems needed to find our way into the future in spite of present shock. Otherwise technological development may well fall before the child's question: Why have the technocrats gone to all the trouble? Answer: Of course, to make people happy! But why, seeing they could make all men deliciously happy, amid the worst privations, with electric charges to the brain?

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