

Book Review

Mark Tovey, ed.

Collective Intelligence: Creating a Prosperous World at Peace

Oakton, Virginia: Earth Intelligence Network, 2008

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Mark Tovey is a fresh-faced yet intense young man. A poet, a cognitive scientist and one-time facilitator of a ten-part series of workshops entitled “Becoming your own Mac guru,” he is completing his Ph.D. at Carleton University in Ottawa. He already sports an impressive résumé.

My first impression of his book was one of dismay. It was not its cover that annoyed me. In fact the entire volume (all 609 pages of it) oozed buoyancy, intriguingly combined with *gravitas*. My apprehension began when I paid closer attention to the layout. It was highly suspicious.

Collective Intelligence (CI) is dedicated to six people including Newt Gingrich’s favourite intellectual and all-time arch-popularizer of futurism, Alvin Toffler (sorry for the guilt by association). It starts with a “Publisher’s Preface” featuring a hierarchical model of a “strategic vision” eerily reminiscent of Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, Kohlberg’s hierarchy of ethical reason and dozens of other structurally similar phylogenetic formulae. It has a “remixed Foreword,” an “Academic Preface,” an “Editor’s Preface,” a “Public Preface” and a “Technical Preface”—all written by different people. In a follow-up to the “Table of Contents,” George Pór tells us that we have in our hands “not only a book [but] a gathering of the tribes.” At this point, my concern was that, if I were to read the volume cover-to-cover, I might need assistance from a religious cult “de-programmer.”

Toward the end, there is an “Afterward” in the form of a conversation between Homer-Dixon and former Canadian Prime Minister and U-2 enthusiast Paul Martin, an “Epilogue,” a “Glossary” of 199 acronyms, three “Lists,” and an eighty-seven page “Index.”

Scrunched in-between the front matter and rear matter are contributions by close to sixty authors (less than ten of whom are women), who tell stories, “think without egos” and have “life trajectories.” They are also highly computer savvy, almost giddy with optimism about the Internet and equipped with files, directories, inventories and agendas all of which appear dedicated to saving the planet and, more to the point, our species. I have a sense that they are all having quite a good time, much in the manner of the hyper-Pong-playing computer geeks popularized in Steward Brand’s “Spacewar: Fanatic Life and Symbolic Death Among the Computer Bums,” on the portentous date of December 7th, 1972. So striking was this impression that, before reading any part in earnest, I thought I read it all before. One of the people to whom this opus is dedicated, Stewart Brand, attempted something of the same sort in a series of projects. Starting out with a tour of Indian reservations and an association with Ken Kesey and the “Merry Pranksters,” he founded *The Whole Earth Catalog* and, later *CoEvolution Quarterly* before turning his hand to conference organizing in the employ of Royal Dutch/Shell and AT&T, and then co-founding the *Global Business Network*. Earlier this year, he published *Whole Earth Discipline: An Ecopragmatist Manifesto*. I was getting a sense of chronic *déjà-vu*.

As a corporate counter to Naomi Klein's *Disaster Capitalism*, I felt I was coming face-to-face with *Rapture Capitalism*.

It didn't help when I came across Thomas W. Malone's "working definition" of CI as "groups of people doing things collectively that seem intelligent." It helped less when he trotted out some current exemplars of CI in the form of corporations such as Hewlet-Packard, Eli Lilly and Google. Clever they certainly are; but sceptics may be forgiven if they worry a little about some of the ethical considerations flowing from the results of their cleverness.

Having thoroughly prejudiced myself, however, I then plunged more deeply into the the text. I was not surprised by what was to be found in terms of complexity, (dis)organization and an appeal to what I can only call the "Gee-whiz" factor. Here is an example: contributor Howard Bloom catches us with the title, "Who's smarter: chimps, baboons or bacteria?" Citing the obvious but nonetheless somewhat disconcerting facts that a colony of bacteria the size of the palm of a human hand contains as many organisms as the total quantity of human beings in the history of our species. He then goes on to speak of the tremendous adaptation capacities of bacteria who have "rejiggered their genomes so they can eat sulfur and rock, live two miles above as well as two miles below the earth's surface and survive in extreme environments of all kinds. What's more, they keep us alive by helping to process our food and, indeed, by helping to make it in the form of pickles and cheese. From all of this, he leaps into the domain of collective intelligence and attributes to bacteria the achievement of having "retooled themselves so that they can live in a flood of radioactive particles that would kill you and me and ... they've learned to manipulate the weather so that the rains and sun give them saunas and the food they love the most.

That is quite a leap. It involves some serious category confusions (in the reader's mind, if not the writer's). That bacteria have adapted is undeniable. That they display a remarkable array of genetic adaptations is clear. That this process involves "rejigging" or "learning" or "any sort of "manipulation" that implies conscious purpose is an almost irresponsible misuse of metaphor. And yet, there is a rather spooky point that is not immediately apparent to linear or (at best) dialectical thinkers like me.

Another example might help. Russian president Medvedev recently advised the American and coalition forces in Afghanistan to respect local cultures and traditions if they hoped to be successful in their efforts to achieve their purposes (whatever those purposes might be). Having been defeated by armed enthusiasts for at least some of those local cultures and traditions (not least the Islamic fundamentalists who were initially supported by, and later turned on, the United States), and rising above the opportunity to demonstrate a sense of irony or even a sort of symbolic revenge, Medvedev alluded to a very important theme in human history.

The fact is that no particular culture whether Athenian, Roman, Aztec, Zulu, Russian, Chinese or Islamic is as simple and monolithic as both its participants and their enemies seem to think, and no temporarily dominant empire can prevail by seeking to impose its will on others. Human social complexity is resilient and resistant to demands for homogeneity. Moreover, just as the animal and plant worlds thrive in conditions of biodiversity, so humanity is well served by social diversity. Homogeneity is a recipe for disaster in changing conditions – and conditions are always changing.

So, it follows that the solutions to all of the manifold and multifaceted “challenges” now confronting our species—whether ecological, economic or ethical—are not likely to flow from a single ideological source. The case for indigenous therapy for social ills is obvious; our reluctance to listen to the ideas of others and our commitment to our own partial and provincial perspectives are the two sides of policy failure.

The point is not that knowledge is power, and power corrupts; instead, it is that knowledge is not all of one piece. Survival follows no single template. Prosperity and peace are even more difficult to sort out.

With this in mind, I approached Mark Tovey’s collage not from a different viewpoint, but from a range of viewpoints. I suspended disbelief, tried strenuously to overcome my own resistance to its occasionally irritating jargon, its indifference to whether it found inspiration in for-profit or non-profit organizations (when I tend to the belief that for-profit companies are not easily persuaded to take the public interest as their top priority) and its sometimes Panglossian attitude toward technological progress.

When I did, I discovered that there is much to be admired and much to be gleaned from *Collective Intelligence*. I still have difficulty with its missionary zeal—but I suppose having a faith of some sort is helpful to anyone seriously thinking about the proximity and devastation of the dangers to global stability that we face daily and that seem to be worsening day-to-day. I find my eyes automatically rolling when I see shades of either Buddhism or Alcoholics Anonymous in CI’s devotion to the ten high-level threats to Humanity [sic] the twelve harmonizing policies . . . and so on.

What I cannot gainsay is that these people are right, at least insofar as they show by comparison how wrong most of the rest of us are. Those who deny the difficulties, peddle indifference as instrumentalism and surrender as pragmatics do need an ideological shake-up. What CI offers may overshoot by being an almost metaphysical shake-up, or it may turn out to be no more than old “new public management” and “quick-fix technology” in a new bottle with a different brand.

Me? I suppose I’ll continue to keep company with doom-merchants such as James Howard Kunstler, author of *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Free Press, 1993) and *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2005).

Those more youthful, more energetic and less fearful of what a bright young man recently called “the audacity of hope” might read Mark Tovey’s collection with a less jaundiced eye. Considering the alternatives and the rather dismal record of their elders to deal with prosperity, peace and the planet, they could certainly do worse.

About the Author

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