

Book Review

Neil Postman

Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Neil Postman is a distinctively modern artefact. Author of twenty books, University Professor, Paulette Goddard Chair of Media Ecology, and Chair of the Department of Culture and Communication at New York University, he certainly has unassailable academic credentials. He is, however, less well known for his scholarship than for his prowess as a popular writer. Such books as *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Random House, 1992), and *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* ((New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995) all set Postman in the mainstream of "mid-cult" criticism.

On a scale of one-to-ten, with one indicating the scurrilous blather of the tabloid press and ten suggesting the obscurantist blather of neomarxist postmodernism, Postman's work merits a seven.

He writes plainly, as befits a winner of the U.S. National Council of Teachers of English's George Orwell Award for Clarity in Language, but he also writes intelligently about important issues. Unlike many self-styled "culture critics," whose prose is accessible only to those masochistic enough to have kept abreast of the theoretical drek of French deconstructionism, Neil Postman worries about practical matters, about fundamental issues of democratic politics, and about the technological future that awaits us as we step uneasily across the bridge to the twenty-first century.

What seems to bother Postman most is the fact that the great innovators (whether Bill Gates or Bill Clinton) seem to have no frame of reference other than their own experience, and that experience is lamentably that of the twentieth century. Such apologists for trends such as information superhighways and economic globalization appear to know nothing of history, philosophy and culture; they live digitally in the specious present. Ignoring Santayana, they are the ones who, being ignorant of the past, are condemned to repeat its mistakes.

Against them, Postman sets himself up as "an enemy of the twentieth-century." His position is well argued and gloriously optimistic. Why, he affirms, should we lower ourselves to the ethical dictates of a century in which more people have been slain in the name of ideology (ours and theirs) than at any other time in human history? Ours is quite obviously the most hideous century to have even existed, the wondrousness of automobiles. Paperback books, home vacuum cleaners, penicillin and e-mail notwithstanding. Speaking personally, I recall learning in high school history (which may or may not be taught anymore) that the "reign of terror" during the low point of the French Revolution managed to sever 20,000 heads from various allegedly aristocratic bodies. This was represented as a singularly evil; it is, however, surely small change when compared to relatively recent events in Sudan, Rwanda, Cambodia, Viet-Nam, to say nothing of Germany in the 1940s or the mindless slaughter of the so-called "Great" War of 1914-1918.

What separates Postman from other "doom-and-gloom" merchants is the fact that he actually possesses a social conscience. I mean by this that he is not only adept at revealing falsehoods, stupidities and conscious evil-doings on the part of those in society with the means to impose their will on others (this is important but it is not enough) but that he is also able to show us how, modestly and with respect to all others, to extricate ourselves from the mess we have created.

He asks us to analyze our habits of thinking and to inquire where and when and why we ask all the wrong questions. Ours is, he readily agrees, the "age of information" but information is not enough. Information (bits and bytes of unrelated data) does not comprise knowledge (the assembly of data into a coherent package of thought), much less wisdom (the placing of thought about any specific subject into a larger context). Neil Postman does not oppose information; he merely wishes that it be allocated to its proper epistemological category and that it be interpreted in terms of a sustained moral discourse.

Where do we find the language to carry on this discourse? For Postman, the 18th century is not a bad place to start. Therein lived Dr. Johnson and Voltaire, Diderot, Adam Smith and Immanuel Kant. Therein Bach, Handel, Mozart and Hayden composed their music as did Beethoven his 1st symphony. It was the era of Swift, Defoe, Fielding and the inestimable William Blake. It was the time of Hogarth, Gainsborough, David and Reynolds. It featured Rousseau. It gave credence to Edmund Burke. It inherited ideas from Isaac Newton and John Locke; it gave ideas to John Stuart Mill and the great romantic poets.

Postman, of course, is culturally limited. His exemplars are largely Dead White European Males but, worse, he emphasizes Dead White American Males-Franklin, Washington, Jefferson and (happily) Tom Paine. Still, his aim is to make us think of the "Enlightenment" as a time which presented the ideas that enlarged human freedom, broadened the scope of science and made that amusingly ambiguous word "happiness" a legitimate condition for "all men" to "pursue."

I'll be frank. I had hoped to like this book more than I did. Postman's earlier works seem to me to be more focussed, more insightful and more compelling. Building a *Bridge to the Eighteenth Century* is simply too convenient, a *fin-de-siecle* offering that is much less than a masterpiece. He is, moreover, far too willing to disdain Charles Darwin (though he cheerfully gives both Marx and Freud a "pass") when he speaks not only of 19th century thought but also of 20th century education. Still, as an antidote to the relentless "high tech," neo-conservative propaganda of our age, it is certainly useful.

After all, when genuine "conservatives" have been silenced and authentic "leftists" have either been marginalized or cast wilfully into the role of terrorists (or Queen's Park rioters as I write this the day after Toronto has experienced its mini-version of the "battle of Seattle"), there is nothing left but a return to civil discourse. It takes an enormous leap of faith to believe that civility will be everywhere or anywhere adopted, not only in exotic states but in the main cities of western democracies.

About the Author:

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