

Virginia Postrel, *The Future and its Enemies: The growing conflict over creativity, enterprise, and progress*, New York: The Free Press, 1998. ISBN 0-684-82760-3

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Even though the title is a lie, this is a book you should read. This book is not about "The Future". At the very best, it is about "A Future"--one of many possible futures no more likely or unlikely than any other. But this book is not really about the future at all. It is an upbeat, sprightly, comprehensive, even compelling whirlwind romp through some trendy ideas of the present. Moreover, it is not, as the subtitle puts it, about "the growing conflict over creativity, enterprise, and progress". Rather, it is an attempt to appropriate a particular meaning for each of those terms, and to exclude other meanings. People termed the "enemies" in the title thus are not enemies of the future at all, but just people who understand "creativity, enterprise and progress" differently from the author and her friends.

A lot about the ideas in the book can be accurately anticipated merely by learning from the dust jacket that the author, "Virginia Postrel, is editor of *Reason* [a major Libertarian magazine], and a columnist for *Forbes* [who also writes] for the *Wall Street Journal* and *Wired*. She lives in Los Angeles."

I must admit there is much about the argument Postrel makes that I like. It is in the vein of Kevin Kelly's *Out of Control*, a book that I admire and that she cites positively several times. Indeed, Postrel's perspective resonates with my own earliest futures-oriented writing ("A cybernetic, post-money, situational-ethic society," *The Futurist*, August 1967) and spelled out in more detail in "Neither there nor then: A eutopian alternative to the 'development' model of future society," in Eleonora Masini, ed., *Human Futures*. London: IPC Science and Technology Press, 1974, and "Loose connections: A vision of a Transformational Society," in Eleonora Masini, ed., *Alternative Visions of Desirable Societies*, New York: Pergamon, 1982. In fact, Postrel's perspective is essentially the foil for my most

recent piece in this journal. It is an example of "The Long Blur", urging that economically- and technologically-driven perpetual change and novelty be unimpeded by bureaucratically-administered majoritarian laws, for which "judicial governance" has become a reasonable response. ["Judicial governance of the Long Blur", *Futures*, Vol. 33, No. 2, March 2001)]

What's not to like about it Postrel's position? She criticizes most of the same obsolete dichotomies we all do.

At the very outset she argues very convincingly that the terms "conservative" and "liberal" are worthless as descriptors of the actual major political cleavages in the United States. On the very first page Postrel tells what happened when the producers of one of the few television shows in the US featuring spirited political debate, *Crossfire* (co-hosted by "liberal" Michael Kinsley and "conservative" Pat Buchanan), lined up Jeremy Rifkin against Ed Cornish. Because Rifkin, a "former antiwar protester and darling of environmentalists, clearly belongs on the left," Cornish, the President of the World Future Society and "a technophile, becomes a right-winger by default," Postrel writes. (1) Rifkin thus was expected to agree with Kinsley and Cornish with Buchanan. But that is not what happened. "Buchanan and Rifkin turned out to be soulmates," Postrel says. "Both men were deeply pessimistic about the future, upset about changes in the world of work, and desperate to find government policies to restore the good old days." (2)

This is all too typical, Postrel argues, but the changed situation is still steadfastly ignored by the mainstream opinion makers who persist in using "liberal" and "conservative" to describe the polar positions of American politics.

The real division in America, Postrel insists, is between "dynamists" and "stasists". There are, however, two types of stasists: reactionaries and technocrats. Once these were bitter enemies, and they often think they still are until they begin to talk together, for now they are united in opposition to the dynamists. "Reactionaries seek to reverse change, restoring the literal or imagined past and holding it in place." "Technocrats promise to manage change, centrally directing 'progress' according to a predictable plan." (7)

"The characteristic values of reactionaries are continuity, rootedness, and geographically defined community. They are generally antic cosmopolitan, antitechnology, anticommercial, antispecialization, and antimobility. They draw on a powerful romantic tradition that gives their politics a poetic, emotional appeal, especially to people with literary sensibilities. With some exceptions, they oppose not only the future but the present and the recent past.... The reactionary vision is one of peasant virtues, of imagined harmonies, and above all, the imaged predictability of traditional life." (8f)

"Technocrats are 'for the future' but only if someone is in charge of making it turn out according to plan." (16) "Accustomed to technocratic governance, we take for granted that each new development...deserves not only public discussion but government scrutiny." (17) Moreover, if something is "bad" it is bad for all, while if "good" then everyone must have it the same "one best way".

Against these two varieties of statists, whether reactionary or technocratic, stands "the party of life"--the "dynamists"--those who understand chaos theory, complexity, evolutionary systems theory, knowing that things grow best--perhaps only--from the ground up, self-empowered and "out of control". Dynamists "emphasize the joys and possibilities of life, and the amazing progress that can happen when people are free to experiment and learn. They have utter contempt for the claim that the world's peasants should be content with their lot. Dynamists are also willing to put up with experiments they think are lousy--not to avoid criticizing them, since criticism is itself an absolutely essential part of the dynamic process, but to let them proceed." (31f)

"Dynamists see undesigned order everywhere in human society from the macrostructures of cities, capital markets, and languages to the microniches of subcultures and specialty products. These patterns are not shaped by a central plan but by decentralized action, feedback, and response." (37)

In short, the reactionaries cry, "Stop it!" The technocrats strive to "control it!" while the dynamists say "Let it be! Enjoy the confusion: evolution will sort it out."

The rest of Postrel's short book gives examples of the follies of the stasists and the vision of the dynamists, again making many points with which I fully agree. Postrel's "dynamists" sounds a lot like my old "Transformational Society".

There can be little doubt that representative governments, with their old-fashioned majority, one-size-fits-all, rules are oppressive and obsolete. New forms of governance which encourage diversity and strive only to buffer the most serious consequences must be sought as sincerely as new forms of economics are. The old averaging laws might have made sense for the industrial era but have been intolerable for many years. More things need to be "out of control."

I am on all fours with her insistence that much of the argument about what is "natural" and what is not, and what is "nature" and hence good, and what is "artificial" and hence bad, is utterly passe.

I certainly favor--indeed, embody--her position on "play" and "fun" over formality and puritanism, to which she devotes an entire chapter. In fact, I may recently have come to "embody" it just a tad too much, but no matter: a waist is a terrible thing to mind.

"We live in an enchanted world," Postrel concludes her book, "a world suffused with intelligence, a world of our making." (217f) "On the verge between centuries, the dynamist promise is not of a particular, carefully outlined future. The future will be as grand, as particular, as we are. We cannot build a single bridge from here to there, for neither here nor there is a single point. And there is no abyss to cross." (218)

What's not to like about all this? Bring it on! In fact, logon to her website, <www.dynamist.com>, as I did, and see how many others in education, in business, in all aspects of life, are joining her to bring in The Future!

But hold on. In fact there is a lot not to like about her view of THE Future, and it is mainly in what is omitted. Its real "enemies" are not the stasists Postrel goes on and on about, but the growing numbers of poor for whom neither the present nor the future may be all that much fun. It is not romanticizing the lives of one billion peasants to say that Postrel's future may not be all that salient to most of them, and that a lot has to happen first before they can jump headfirst into Postrel's hot tub--assuming that most of them might eventually want to.

It is not as pathological as Postrel implies for some people to prefer a stable, given identity over a precarious, earned one. One of the most frightening questions any adult can ever ask a child is, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" What a burden! What a challenge! Imagine instead the comfort of knowing what you are so that you can get on with the joys of living, and not have to spend every waking minute scrambling to "earn" a life. For many people, having an identity is more satisfying than endlessly striving to attain one.

Moreover, though Postrel may find it difficult to grasp, one does not need to be either a reactionary or a technocrat to believe there may be more to life than being a consumer. Some choices may be more important to some people than whether or not they can supersize their fries.

Postrel makes no mention of the fact that, in a society guided only by some "rules of the game" and with no one to enforce them, it is far too easy for some people to gain control over most assets at the outset of the game, and keep them forever. If life really were like a chatroom from which one can unsubscribe when someone becomes offensive, or like a game of *Monopoly*, where everyone gets to start all over again with 200 dollars each, and at the end go home for milk and warm cookies, Postrel's Libertarian society might be great. But in a world (even in the New Economy) where most of the wealthy inherit their wealth, make and break the rules with impunity, and yet can have them enforced against others by their police and military, there is something to be said for justice and the equal protection of the laws by the "technocrats" as Postrel defines them.

But Postrel makes no mention of crime, or crime fighting, or police terror. No mention of the military and of weapons manufacturers who continue to eat a huge proportion of the wealth of the world and contribute so much to its pollution.

Neither is there any mention whatsoever in Postrel's book of any serious environmental futures--no problems with water, food, pesticides, energy, population (even aging or population decline) sea level rise, climate change.

She does not mention global change even once--not even to condemn the concern. Postrel makes one passing mention of the Greenhouse Effect, but it is in a citation from Bill McKibben's book, *The End of Nature*, and she uses it to attack McKibben's position on "nature" and not to comment on the Greenhouse Effect itself.

These are rather significant omissions it seems to me. If she can show convincingly how these "enemies" to her future can be overcome by the ways and means of her future itself, then I will be delighted. As I say, I find a lot in it I like enormously.

But power exists. The Military-Industrial Establishment is firmly entrenched, and Postrel's Free Market Libertarians are merely the sticky sweet frosting on top of a heavy Command Economy poundcake.

Cultures of privilege exist which create and preserve cultures of institutionalized poverty. Neither favors a society "out of control."

Many people worldwide prefer to live in ways which the monocular Free Market Society does not permit unless it is sanitized, commodified, and rendered as a freakshow in Tomorrowland, thus becoming everything its proponents are striving not to become.

The globe is warming, the seas are rising, fresh water is becoming more scarce, "governing evolution" will occupy more and more of our time, if humanity is to have a future at all.

But on all of these issues, her future is silent.

Postrel, as you might imagine, is a big fan of Friedrich Hayek who wrote, "We must shed the illusion that we can deliberately create the future of mankind. "

From one perspective, Hayek and Postrel are absolutely right, and I believe most futurists have long ago "shed" that "illusion". Utopias are out. We know they become dystopias all too soon.

But it is also an illusion to pretend that each of us does not in fact contribute towards the creation of one future over others by the way we choose to live our daily lives. It is irresponsible of us to fail continuously to ask (collectively as well as individually) how our lives will impact the lives of future generations, and then to guide our actions accordingly, as best (and as imperfectly) as we can.

Postrel would have us eat, drink, and be merry without the slightest concern about what this might mean for future generations. It is not "building a single bridge to the future" for each of us to try to live so that we leave future generations the kind of options for diversity, creativity and fun that Postrel says she wants for herself now. It is just being fair.