

An Optimist's Tour of the Future: one curious man sets out to answer 'What's next?'

Mark Stevenson

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Review by Tricia Lustig

The future is here. It's just not widely distributed yet. – William Gibson

I get tired of hearing continually about how bad things are, how we are going to hell in a hand basket. I'm always on the lookout for examples of things going well, of people and businesses achieving success so we can do more of that. If it works, let's keep up the good work.

So I was pleased to read *An Optimist's Tour of the Future* by Mark Stevenson. It does what it says on the tin: it takes a positive look at how people are changing the world for the better. I have since met Mark, and he is curious, passionate about what works AND working to do something to make some of the great future possibilities really happen and spread (see notes on the Epilogue and his League of Pragmatic Optimists, below).

There are four sections: Man, Machine, Earth and Re-Boot (like when you have to restart your computer because it failed). Some of the ideas and things that are already happening could be seen as frightening. For example, I don't think I want to live forever as the 'Transhumanists' do in his book. But a lot of the ideas being developed now are of interest – I certainly would appreciate it if cures can be found for illnesses like cancer and Alzheimer's.

I found his stories about programming engaging. This is not just programming robots (and what some of the robots can already do today is amazing), but also programming DNA. He talks about nano-technology: very appropriate as the Mars rover Curiosity, which landed successfully, is an object lesson

in applying this technology. And he discusses the possibilities of augmented intelligence: controversial, thought-provoking and scary.

I was very much taken with “when ideas have sex” from the chapter ‘Making a Road Where There Isn’t One’ in the Re-Boot section. What a great metaphor! This is when, as Matt Ridley says, “human culture allows ideas to meet and interact freely”. We certainly need more of it now, as the rate of change continues to accelerate.

Which leads naturally on to the chapter entitled ‘Future Shock’, in which Stevenson emphasises that we can no longer expect or accept the ‘business as usual’ outlook of the Great Moderation. The way we structure our businesses is based on our existing infrastructure, not on the way that we currently experience accelerating change in the environment around us. Yet many companies still expect to survive and thrive based on the Great Moderation’s assumptions of stability and constant growth. Such businesses are unable to engage with the emerging world of fast-paced innovation.

Today’s innovation challenge is not technological innovation: it is organisational or institutional innovation. It is about creating new ways of organising and new ways of doing business. How we respond to the information age, constantly adapting and learning to take advantage of what is coming on-stream: this is what will make the difference between success and failure.

In the final section – the Epilogue – Mark discusses what he is doing about spreading the ideas and making the preferred future real: he has started ‘The League of Pragmatic Optimists’ (<http://leagueofpragmaticoptimists.org/>) which says it (LOPO) is a meeting place in cities and towns across the globe where people who want to make the world better can meet, generate ideas and projects, get inspiration and a recharge, find collaborators and have their neurons tickled in the cause of improving the story of humanity. Another way of looking at it is as an exercise in ‘engineered serendipity’ – a mechanism for diverse people and ideas to bump into each other and create (and deliver) projects that aim to improve

things. Local chapters meet at regular intervals to free themselves from day-to-day organisational or mental silos, and network in an inspiring atmosphere of do-ers.

This is an enjoyable read – a journey to the future. A journey that celebrates what is going well, that celebrates success. At the end, Mark’s take is that “making mistakes is OK, not trying is irresponsible”.

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