

BOOK REVIEWS

Future Tense? Technology in Australia edited by Stephen Hill and Ron Johnston

(University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1983) pp. xii + 215, \$19.95.

For those who have forgotten the 1980 Myers Report (Committee of Inquiry into Technological Change in Australia, Technological Change in Australia, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1980), *Future Tense?* provides an instructive reminder of its weaknesses. Myers' assumptions on technological change and the Report's recommendations form a point of departure for many of the ten chapters contributed by academics from the Wollongong University Technology and Social Change Programme, with a chapter by Chris Freeman from Sussex. The first part of the book deals with technological change in the wider social and economic context. The second part covers a wide range of issues — trade unions, occupational health and safety, education, management and organisations, and technology assessment.

It is a virtue of the book that it emphasises the interdependence of things technological, social and economic. "Technology", say Hill and Johnston, "is a system embedded in a context". Unpacking that context is Hill's central concern in his chapter on technology and society. Here are good arguments and insights confounded by a mixture of conflicting concepts drawn from different social theories, with parts reading rather like Marx's celebrated aphorism of 1847 about handmills and feudal lords, and steam mills and capitalists. The significance of technology for the social organisation of power comes across more clearly in Morrissey's chapter on occupational health and safety. With a narrow focus on an issue of shop floor politics, his analysis is grounded in theories of the labour process in the 'contested terrain' tradition of Edwards and others. Morrissey also provides a good account of the ideological underpinnings of Myers' concepts of technological change.

Freeman's chapter on change and economic context has some useful material on 'long wave' theory, which also enters Hill's chapter as well as Windschuttle's on employment. Windschuttle gives a bleak picture of the restructuring process affecting the Australian economy, and the employment effects of new technology in the manufacturing and service sectors. In his introductory section he criticises economists Sheehan, Hughes, Gruen and Lamberton for their views on the technology-unemployment relationship. Lamberton comes in for criticism on a number of grounds, based on Windschuttle's interpretation of Lamberton's commissioned study for CITCA on the word processor industry (Myers Report, Vol. 4). Windschuttle attributes to Lamberton a "sanguine view of the future job prospects of office workers", but this is hardly borne out by a reading of Lamberton's piece in Myers. Windschuttle then links Lamberton's study to methodological problems of a kind he sees exemplified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

survey of technological change in private industry, commissioned by CITCA. Now while it is reasonable to criticise the ABS survey, and Myers use of it, for the reasons suggested by Windschuttle, it is not the case that Lamberton used the same or similar methodology. Windschuttle is apparently unaware that the most forceful criticism of the ABS survey was made by Lamberton, Macdonald and Mandeville over two years ago.

Given the book's central theme of a self-determined future — for Australians to become "masters of the tools we use and the products we enjoy" — Johnston's chapter on the control of technological change in Australia is a key one. He begins with a discussion of the structure of Australian industry and suggests that the decline in manufacturing ("a process of de-industrialisation") is in part a consequence of our dependence on foreign technology in our own manufactured goods. He points to high levels of concentration and to foreign ownership via transnational corporations. Foreign control, he says, is concentrated in sectors which are capital intensive, high technology industries. Technological change and its potential rewards are greatest in those areas where foreign control is concentrated. Thus, without a major change of direction "the prospects for an autonomous technological future are dim."

In their conclusion to the book, Hill and Johnston suggest policies which might lead us away from this dim prospect, towards the exercise of effective choice in the technology we get and in our ability to control social and economic effects. Government policies should be selective, and they should be co-ordinated, so that technology policies are linked to policies on education and training, R&D, protection, and the like. This is a sound conclusion and its importance cannot be overemphasised in the dawning age of sunrise industries. What is missing from the discussion on policies is any reference to the role of income policies for distributing the gains of technological change and for a full employment objective.

In a short review it is not possible to deal with all the chapters in this book. In a slim volume covering many issues of technological change there is something of value for everybody, but some complex arguments are inevitably compressed. There are also some minor annoyances. In Hagan and Markey's chapter on trade unions, there is a lot of very useful detailed information on wage determination, union organisation, and industrial democracy. Their chapter closely examines the recommendations on industrial relations in the Myers Report. But it is a pity it was not updated. Perhaps there is nothing, or next to nothing, to say about the outcome of Myers' recommendations, but this chapter appears to have been written around mid-1981 (it refers to "the recent resignation of Andrew Peacock, Minister for Industrial Relations"). Had it been updated, it could have considered matters like the outcome of the long dispute between the Australian Telecommunications Employees' Association and Telecom, or the (still extant) Australian Council of Trade Unions' test case on redundancy.

Future Tense? is an important book because it will stimulate informed

debate on issues of technological change in Australia. It will be of great value to students in Technology and Society and related courses.

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Choice by Cable: The Economics of a New Era in Television by *Cento G. Veljanovski and William D. Bishop*

[Hobart Paper 96, Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 1983] pp. 120, £2.50.

Telecommunications has been given a high priority in the industrial policy of Britain's Thatcher government. In the catchwords of the policy makers, telecommunications is being 'deregulated' and 'privatised'. British Telecom's telephone service and equipment monopolies have been dismantled and are being sold to the private sector, and a second commercial television network (ITV Channel 4) has been established. The government has also agreed to the introduction in Britain of direct broadcasting by satellite.

Fourteen per cent of British households with television sets currently receive their signals by cable. The cable systems are permitted, however, to carry only BBC and ITV transmissions and are prohibited from originating their own programmes. In March 1982, the government set up a three-man Committee of Inquiry under Lord Hunt, a former Secretary to the Cabinet, to consider the expansion of cable in Britain. The Hunt Report (*Report of the Inquiry into Cable Expansion and Broadcasting Policy*, Cmnd. 8679, HMSO, London, 1982) was published in September, recommending that the cable industry be allowed greatly to extend its activities and areas of operation. Cable systems should be permitted to have unlimited channels, to be able to transmit their own programmes, to be partly financed by advertising and to be subject to only minimal government regulation. In December 1982 the Home Secretary announced that the government was broadly in accord with the general approach and particular recommendations of the Hunt Report. In all, the decision by the government to cable Britain and the formulation of public policy on cable took a little over one year.

Choice by Cable has been written in response to the Hunt Report, which Veljanovski and Bishop claim "contains no thorough or systematic analysis of the issues raised by cable expansion" (p. 23), and which "proceeds from recommendation to recommendation by the force of assertion rather than reasoned argument" (p. 100). Implicitly, *Cable by Choice* sets out to provide a systematic analysis of the proposal to extend cable throughout Britain and to review the policy recommendations of the Hunt Report.

Veljanovski and Bishop argued within a theoretical, free-market-oriented, microeconomic framework. For them, "the central issue in any economic evaluation of the cable industry is the respective contributions of the market and regulation to maximising the welfare of the consumer" (p. 44), and "the objective of cable policy should be to maximise consumer