

HAVE TO COST THE LIVES OF OTHERS?



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Tuesday Book: Inside the soul of time

By David Goldblatt

THE CLOCK OF THE LONG NOW: TIME AND RESPONSIBILITY BY STEWART BRAND, WEIDENFELD & NICOLSON, pounds 12.99

WE USED just to pass the time; now we spend it, make it, kill it and waste it. Western societies first learnt to measure time, then to regulate and manipulate it. Clocks were the mainspring of the process, turning variable, cyclical, natural time into uniform, linear, social time. Time management and time-and-motion studies provided the tools for turning abstract time into commodified working time. Greenwich Mean Time made this model universal.

Despite this furious rationalisation of time, we are hardly any more sophisticated in our thinking about it than our predecessors. If the Dome and its Millennium Experience are anything to go by, we have probably regressed. Our incapacity to think collectively about the past has yielded a millennial celebration that is almost completely devoid of historical content. Even the Christian era, which defines this calendrical event, is too long and too complex to provide an organising principle for collective reflection. I understand that the defining moments of the last 1,000 years have been handed over to the Blackadder script team.

Our capacity to think about the future is marked by unforgivable hubris, for the defining movements and forces of the 21st century will not be generated on this post-industrial island. Perhaps worse, we have abdicated responsibility for envisioning the future to Ford, News International and BT. That said, the British are amateurs at this kind of theme-park history and bland futurism. For the real thing, go west to the Californian heartlands of the information industries, where they have been strip-mining the past and mortgaging off the future for decades.

It is in opposition to that milieu and its narcissistic consumerism that Stewart Brand brought us *The Whole Earth Catalog* - the essential Seventies guide to sustainable hippiedom. Twenty years later, he has offered an antidote to societies that can no longer think sensibly about time, or mark its passing in an appropriate fashion. We need to learn to do both as a matter of urgency.

Brand rightly argues that the pace of personal life, the demands of our working lives and the rate of technological change have sped up so much that our sense of now has shrunk to a nanosecond. Simultaneously, the environmental consequences of our voracious patterns of consumption demand that we start thinking long-term. The most pressing questions of public life in the 21st century - such as global warming and resource depletion - cannot be tackled unless long-term thinking and responsibility become the effortless common sense of public and private life. We need to start living in the "long now".

Brand, and the eclectic brigade of ex-Disney executives and Silicon Valley futurists (not to mention Brian Eno)

who make up the Long Now Foundation, have come up with a striking piece of cultural engineering. In 1969 the Apollo space programme started beaming back the first pictures of a beautiful, blue-green Earth suspended in the blackness of the Universe. It transformed our perception of the planet. Its singularity, its frailty, its uniqueness, became inescapable. It helped contribute to a paradigm shift in thinking about environmental interdependence. We really were one world. What is required now is a similarly iconic event or object that can do for time what Apollo did for space.

Enter the Clock of the Long Now. Brand proposes a clock that will tell the time over 10,000 years, the approximate time-span of recorded history since the invention of agriculture. The foundation is already designing and building prototypes. The clock will place the now, the year, the century, in their proper perspectives. Think massive; think Stonehenge. Think of a clock constructed within a hollowed-out mountain in the desert. This clock won't just tell the time; it will be a spiritual experience.

Think durable. The clock must be supported by a foundation whose internal principles give it a reasonable chance of lasting the 10-millennia course and allow it to sustain cross-generational e-mails, the promotion of very long scientific and sociological research programmes, and the recording of environmental hazards for future generations. The clock itself must be designed to last. At the very least, it must be intuitively repairable by generations that have no knowledge of its origins.

I'm convinced. I'll visit. I may even make a donation. But I could live without the cod sociology that pads out the book. It reads like a prospectus for a software start-up, cut and pasted with fragments of e-mail conversations, partially digested business-school voodoo and notes from earnest round tables in Californian desert retreats.

Clocks are powerful things, but they have always had to work with the grain of social and economic forces. The Clock of the Long Now and its foundation are unlikely to make their paradigm shift until they engage with the mainspring of our attention-deficit syndrome - the blind and ferocious power of an unfettered global economy and the unquenchable demand for consumption. They don't like that at the Dome, and they may not like it at Disney or down in Silicon Valley.

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