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Book Review: I Have Seen the Future and It Computes

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BOOK REVIEWS

Bill Gates, *The Road Ahead*
(Viking, 1995)

Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs*
(ReganBooks, 1995)

"I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE AND IT
COMPUTES"

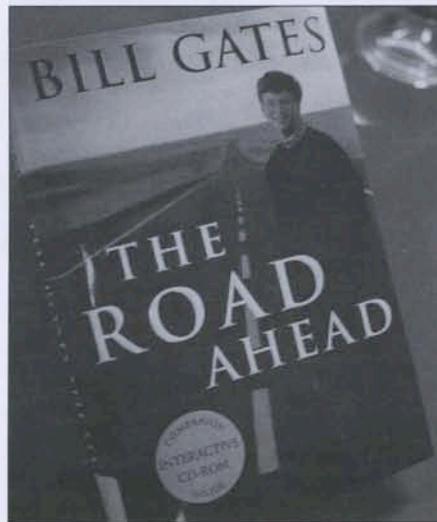
Charles Angell

I'm someone," Bill Gates says early in *The Road Ahead*, "who believes that because progress will come no matter what, we need to make the best of it" (4). Gates ardently believes that the computer revolution in which he has figured so hugely and from which he has made if not the best, the most, will improve everyone's quality of life. His optimism guides his conviction that this electronic technology with its compatibility, feedback, and constant innovation will permit us "to witness the realization of Adam Smith's ideal market at last" (4) where "digital information of all kinds, not just money, will be the new medium of exchange" (6). Gates persists in his theme that "capitalism, demonstrably the greatest of all constructed economic systems, has in the past decade clearly proved its advantages over the alternative systems" (183). In *Gates* the reader finds combined the free market entrepreneur and technocrat. It's an uneasy co-existence.

The entrepreneurial Gates recounts how he and his Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen early saw the potential for integrated circuits. He admits they were lucky in perceiving that what appeared no more than an expensive toy might become a powerful tool. That the Intel 8008

microchip would quickly evolve into the ten times more powerful 8080 chip and make possible "personal, affordable, and adaptable" computers, replacing big mainframes, fueled Gates' and Allen's ambition to write the software that would allow the new processors to operate. They succeeded, and their success has become another of America's archetypal stories of brains, pluck, hard work, and luck.

Gates views the free market as the ideal place for nurturing innovation. Though he admits the impossibility of anticipating what products consumers will select, he nonetheless argues that the capitalist market will advance progress. He



suggests that technological advances in information production, transmission, and distribution will eliminate obstacles between buyers and sellers, creating what Gates calls "friction-free capitalism." In stressing the smoothness of this process, Gates will look back along the road and analogize what is happening now to what happened with earlier technological innovations. He speculates that emerging computer information technology will repeat the pattern that followed the wiring of the United States for telephones and electric lights where new applications quickly became available for these nascent technologies. Throughout *The Road Ahead* Gates implies that the road ahead will be an endless highway with few

dislocations, discontinuities, and displacements.

Gates must concede that the information revolution has created anxiety among those whose employment is threatened, altered, or outright eliminated. "But," he assures the reader, "new [industries] will flourish. This will be happening over the next two or three decades, which is fast by historical standards, but may turn out to be no more disruptive than the pace at which the microprocessor revolution brought about its changes in the workplace, or the upheavals in the airline, trucking, and banking industries over the last decade." Gates' optimism that such disruption will be no more than an historical pothole in the road ahead (or a software bug to be corrected by some clever programmer) can hardly reassure the displaced workers for whom the twenty or thirty years are the prime of a working life. Gates the entrepreneur sees his road ahead leading to a city on a hill managed and maintained by electronic wizardry where all will be worthwhile and well.

As a matter of fact, Gates devotes considerable space in his chapter, "Plugged in at Home," to his personal city on a hill, the hillside home he's building overlooking Lake Washington, the Cascade Mountains, and Seattle. "A house," proclaims Gates, "is an intimate companion, or in the words of the great twentieth century architect Le Corbusier, 'a machine for living in.'" Gates the technocrat goes to some pains explaining how his intimate companion will incorporate state-of-the-art electronic machines. Here the whiz kid's fascination with gadgets, fueled by the entrepreneur's fortune, becomes the technocrat's obsession with control. Gates explains that when visitors enter his new home, they'll be "presented with an electronic pin" that attaches to their clothes and connects the visitor to all the "electronic services of the house," and "will tell the house who and where you are, and the house will use the information to try to meet and even anticipate your needs--all as unobtrusively

as possible." The pin will illuminate rooms as guests enter, remember their tastes in music and play it, and even screen their favorite movies or news programs on conveniently located monitors. "A house that tracks its occupants in order to meet their particular needs" combines "the tradition of unobtrusive service" with the tradition "that an object we carry entitles us to be treated in a certain way." The electronic pin--like keys, name tags, or licenses--authenticates and validates us. Gates expresses such enthusiasm about his electronic pin's ability to track his guests that I feel somewhat churlish for noting that the counterparts to such pins are presently being used to keep tabs on allegedly non-dangerous convicts circulating among us. Gates employs 'unobtrusive' to describe his technological marvels sufficiently often to suggest that at some level he's aware how potentially intrusive the technology is. When he states that his "house will be instrumented so it records statistics on the operation of all systems, and we'll be able to analyze that information to tune the systems," he implies that his guests are another component requiring analysis and calibration. Robert Owen's plan for a Panopticon, a prison so constructed that the prisoners were always and everywhere in view of the guards, operated on a similar principle.

Talking about his house, Gates points out how when constructing his estate San Simeon, William Randolph Hearst had several radios, each tuned to a different station, installed in the basement and routed to a receiver placed within a 15th century oak cabinet located in his private suite where, at the push of a button, he could listen to his favorite station. "I am certainly in no way comparing my house with San Simeon," Gates insists, "one of the West Coast's monuments to excess." Yet, Gates mentions that his home's database will include "more than a million still images, including photographs and reproductions of paintings." A few pages

later Gates informs the reader that "the most interesting piece of 'art' I own is a scientific notebook kept by Leonardo da Vinci in the early 1500s. I've admired Leonardo since I was young because he was a genius in so many fields and so far ahead of his time. Even though what I own is a notebook of writings and drawings, rather than a painting, no reproduction could do it full justice." Fifteenth-century oak cabinet or 15th century notebook of a genius: technocratic excess can assume many forms.



Stuck at a trade show in Las Vegas, Dan, the protagonist of Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs*, observes: "The real world is a porno movie. I'm convinced." Coupland displays for his readers Microsoft from the vantage of the programmers who must under deadlines produce shippable product. Bill Gates, Dan tells us, "is a moral force, a spectral force, a force that shapes, a force that molds. A force with thick, thick glasses." Dan and his programmer friends represent a cohort wholly enthralled by the information technology and the consumer marketplace it serves. They're aware they're "deficient in the having-a-life-

department." They also know, when they pause to take a realistic look at what they're doing, that they're not inventing the future but improving office furniture and products.

Dan observes at one point in the novel that "Syntex was the first corporation to invent the 'workplace as campus.' . . . In the 1980s, corporate integration punctured the *next* realm of corporate life invasion at 'campuses' like Microsoft and Apple--with the next level of intrusion being that the borderline between work and life blurred to the point of unrecognizability." The intrusiveness of corporate life into personal life leads Dan to attempt a relationship with Karla, herself commitment averse. She tells Dan: "There's just so much I want to forget, Dan. I thought I was going to be a READ ONLY file. I never thought I'd be interactive."

"I said, 'Don't worry about it Karla. Because in the end we forget everything, anyway. We're human; we're amnesia machines.'"

Late in *Microserfs*, after Dan's mother has suffered a disabling stroke, his friend Michael suggests linking her to a computer such to help her communicate. She types out, as her first words, "I am here" and thus the machine does recover her memory and authenticate her presence. Slowly, like a child beginning to speak, she recuperates her memory and finally addresses Karla as "MY DOTTR." Dan says, just before his Mother speaks, "sometimes we all forget that the world itself is paradise, and there has been much of late to encourage that amnesia." Coupland insists that technology may not lead us to lead us to paradise, may in fact cause us to make a Hell of Heaven, but it may help us preserve "the living record of [our] memory/ 'gainst death and all oblivious enmity."

Charles Angell is Professor of English.