Does it mean . . . .

SWILLING AT McIDEAS

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I was born in 1945. During the 1950s the mass media and a legion of experts promised me a gee whiz future world. Now nudging 50 I should be enjoying commuter space travel; anti-gravitational transport; cars that no longer require wheels, rubber or petrol; a stainless steel antiseptic world of clean geometric cities where all physical labour is done by robots.

Instead there is a sick world; the seas and skies are being polluted; topsoil blows away; deserts creep like melanomas across continents; the forest lungs are being destroyed by acid rain, timber harvesting, and general clearance.

In Australia we have a society increasingly unable to deliver or maintain clean water, clean air, and an equitable health care system; where garbage and human waste are major problems; where education equity is eroded by funding and teacher cuts, composite classes, school closures, while the prospect of upfront fees promises to limit tertiary education to the well heeled; a society where social justice generally is marginalised as socially irrelevant. At the same time childhood and youth are manipulated by commercial interests; a social class of low-paid school age workers is emerging hell bent on consumption, cogs in the machineries of fast food and supermarket chains. At the same time post-school youth unemployment is tragically high. The youth suicide rate climbs.

Today’s futurologists peddle visions of a technologically gee whiz future, one in which many of us will be alien unless we immerse ourselves in the culture and accoutrements of microchips and microbytes; a future in which the knowledge and skills we already have will be irrelevant, and in which few of the lessons or experiences of the past are applicable; a future where history comes to rest.

Ironically, however, the future is shaping to be familiar territory. The map of Europe is daily recast in the political divisions of the nineteenth century. Virulent nationalism is again a feature of European politics. News from the former USSR reads like a rerun of the disintegrating Tsarist Empire. Reports from the former Yugoslavia are familiar to students of Balkan history. Germany unifies - again. Just as Japan was working in the world of the early 1900s in ways Euro-centred thinking could neither envisage nor conceptualise, so too today.

We head towards a future in which chronological time moves forward, but human and political dimensions move otherwise. And looking backwards I sniff traces of other eras.

Not long before his death in 1947, sociologist Karl Mannheim, once a refugee from Hitler’s new world order, discussed the post-1945 new world order.

He argued that a society where political democracy was allied with a competitive economy based on private property, the profit motive, and the life-and-death struggles of the market place, and where the gap between the haves and have-nots increases and people come to believe only in power and violence and “rugged individualism”, and where notions of the redistribution of power and wealth go out the window, then that society will be contaminated, the process leading to fascism - a dated term in this era of cyberspace and postmodernism, but the message is clear and real enough.

Mannheim’s words resonate across the decades and should serve as a warning as the voices of post-Cold War reconstruction talk of a new world order based on market forces, the “level playing field”, privatisation, and policies which cynically lead to increasing gaps between the haves and have-nots, and which see social justice through the prism of economic imperatives and the principles of managerialism and utility.

A process has been set in motion to confuse, frighten, awe, and emasculate us, to turn us into pliant, obedient, rootless idiots, to cut us off from the past and any idea we can learn from it, and to convince us that socialist visions are facile, outdated, doomed. Rather, it seems, we should feast on swill at McIdeas with its smorgasbord of immediacy, self interest, consumerism, materialism, and utility.

Not for me. Paul Goodman and A.S. Neill are still on my bookshelf. Thoreau’s collected works hone my cantankerousness. Peter Marshall’s Demanding the Impossible (London, 1992) is a recent delight. Mao’s 1939 article “To be attacked by the enemy is not a bad thing but a good thing” reminds me of a few hard truths.

In a human sense, there is nothing really new about the future. And nothing really new about the ways to go about changing things.