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FUTURE SHOCK. By Alvin Toffler. 505 pages. Random House. 1970. \$8.50.

It is easy to underestimate the kind of popularized social science Toffler provides in his book *Future Shock*. One mark of the professional social scientist is a concern with *distribution*. For the social scientist, the implications of the fact that people buy disposable paper wedding gowns depend very much on whether the people involved amount to less than one hundredth of one percent of the population, or, say, one third of the population. The popularizers of social science, however, tend to disregard such differences in distribution and frequently seize on exceptions as if they were significant new rules.

The popularizer uses phenomena that attract his attention to support generalizations he wishes to make *symptomatic*; e.g., renting a car rather than owning one is "symptomatic" of our transient society. The professional must worry about distinguishing that which is "symptomatic" from that which has no significance beyond itself. (For me, renting a car once in a while means freedom from enslavement to a car when I don't need one). The popularizers rarely account for their "symptomatology," possibly because, for them, any source or fact is as good as another. Typically, Toffler quotes everyone in sight—armchair observers, psychiatrists, census takers, and journalists are all used for documentation. And when citing proves too arduous, complex matters are settled by a brief sentence or two: "Sexual standards are overthrown. Great cities are paralyzed by strikes, power failures, riots." (p. 65.) Actually, experts disagree widely as to what extent sexual standards have changed, and I know of no city that has actually been *paralyzed* under the conditions discussed; in fact, most cities prove to be surprisingly adaptive to such stresses, and the most severe disruptions have been only temporary.

Finally, Toffler, like many other futurists, frequently refers to the future as if, like some objective quantity, it can be observed and assessed. In my judgment, there is little we can say about the future with any degree of specificity. For instance, the suggestion that people will raise children after retire-

ment, foregoing care of their own biological offspring (p. 215), should be qualified, as Toffler does, by "maybe." But then "maybe not" may be the more apt qualifier. A string of "maybes" comprise the foundation on which speculative towers are then erected and dire views formulated, *as if* the maybes are "will bes." But precisely in this area lies the value of Toffler and other futurists who tend to operate on often groundless assumptions. Their works should be read as thought-provoking, concept-developing, speculative tracts. One should simply forget about *the future*—even a good fix on the present is not available—and benefit from the sociological imagination as it is stimulated by anecdotes and "maybes."

The message of Toffler's book is that we face a "roaring current of change, a current so powerful today that it overturns institutions, shifts our values, and shrivels our roots." The problem is the rate, the acceleration of change "quite apart, and sometimes more important than the direction of change." Just as sudden exposure to Western civilization throws preliterate tribes into cultural shock, we are shattered and disoriented when struck by the Future.

Above all, the shock is magnified by the temporary nature of our relationships to things (rent-a-car; throwaways); to people (high geographic and social mobility); to images (frequently revised); and to experiences (massproduced, and changed to order). The family—once the "future-shock absorber"—is itself scaled down, temporarized, revised, and made part of what Toffler calls "ad-hocracy."

If you tone down the alarm and ask what will happen *if* our society, which may have become *gradually* more "temporary" since the beginning of industrialization, continues to become more temporary, you face many of the issues Toffler discusses *without* an assumption of a shock (people and governments may not know what to do if they are not cast into a state of shock), and without any assumption of a dramatic change in our condition but rather with a progressive (although probably not unilinear) deepening

AMITAI ETZIONI is Director of the Center for Policy Research and author of *The Active Society* (Free Press, 1968).

FUTUROLOGY
by Amitai Etzioni

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of the problem. Toffler *does* make us think about how much change we can take, whether it is worth the price, and what we can do to slow down.

The ultimate test of the sociological imagination is not its critical stance, not its identification of information overloads, psychic undercapacities, personal problems, and institutional crises; these conditions are so rampant that if you throw a dart even blindly, you are likely to hit a few. The quality of marksmanship is determined by the alternatives indicated. Here Toffler does better than many, although he fades out at a critical point.

He lists new "future-shock absorbers." He draws on efforts made, under the guidance of applied anthropologists, to help preliterate peoples to cope with industrialization through the process of anticipatory socialization; they are made aware of what will happen and encouraged to think and adapt before the storm hits. He thus favors scientists who work with government agencies and corporations to prepare them for the accelerating changes. Toffler also calls for a "technological ombudsman" who may discourage—or even ban—a few technologies, and for planners who are more concerned with human values and less with efficiency, as well as for the use of technology to rebuild human relations (as in computer dating).

Toffler's orientation, illustrated by these specific suggestions, seems to me quite meritorious: he is for greater anticipation of what is to come and against myopic sailing, and he supports the control of technology and its use for humane purposes. The questions Toffler does not deal with are the political ones: Which forces—classes, power structures, social movements—portend a wild future? Which will help man to come out on top and control his projections into the future? Who shocks and who favors the shock absorbers? Or better yet, who or what can reduce the need and the capacity to shock us so that our roots shrivel? ●