

# Book Review

December 2013

## The Third Wave, The Classic Study of the Future

Alvin Toffler,

A Bantam Book published in association with William Morrow & Co., Inc, New York, 1980.

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### Summary

Alvin Toffler is an incredibly smart guy with a deep and fertile understanding of the past and a great perspective on the future. He wrote this book over thirty years ago. As one reads his analyses and forecasts, one quickly appreciates the march of history through the first and second waves. His anticipation of today's environment, as he viewed the world in the late 1970s, is beyond prescient.

### Implications for the American City

A New civilization “will topple bureaucracies, reduce the role of the nation-state, and gives us semiautonomous economies in a post-imperialist world.” [27] “The Third Wave brings with it a genuinely new way of life based on [p26]:

- Diversity, renewable energy sources;
- Methods of production that make most factory assembly lines obsolete;
- New non-nuclear families;
- A novel institution that might be called the “electronic cottage”; and
- Radically changed schools and corporations of the future.”

### The Principle Ideas of the Second Wave.

- Globalization has created tension between sovereign power and international processes [see *The Globalization Paradox, Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* by Dani Rodrik]. The role of the nation-state is indeed evolving with pressures from above and below. Today's paralysis of the U.S. federal government is exhibit #1.
- The collision of the waves creates chaos. Think of a day at the beach. The waves do not uniformly approach the shore; they come from different directions; they have different sizes; some are coming into the shore, some are going out to sea; occasionally there is a strong undercurrent or rip tide. This seems to be the picture of Mr. Toffler's “waves” of civilization.

#### Alvin Toffler, Writer

Alvin Toffler is an American writer and futurist, known for his works discussing the digital revolution, communication revolution and technological singularity. Toffler is a former associate editor of *Fortune*.

**Born:** October 4, 1928 (age 85), New York City, NY

**Education:** New York University

**Spouse and Collaborator:** Adelaide Elizabeth Farrell (m. 1950)

Selected Books:

- [The Third Wave, 1980](#)
- [Future Shock, 1970](#)
- [Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth, and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century, 1991](#)
- [Revolutionary Wealth, 2006](#)
- [Previews and Premises, 1983](#)

Source: Wikipedia

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- The family structure has evolved from the agricultural age “extended family” to the industrial age “nuclear family” to what is expected to be the “expanded family”. The expanded family is the result of many marriages with multiple father and mother figures, children from different parents living in a single family setting, changing bread-winner roles and more parents working at home. More and more people are choosing and will continue to choose to live alone. Cities will need to adjust their idea of the “typical” family and their needs to this new model. Second wave ideas about housing, neighborhoods, employment, education, health care, shopping, travel modes and recreation/entertainment outlets are evolving.
- Mass production, mass consumption, big business, big government, big labor and big media are all getting sliced and diced into smaller, more personalized chunks. Small, tailored, individualized is the new big, one-size-fits-all.
- Toffler continues his idea of the “prosumer”...the person that produces for his/her own consumption. “industrialization broke the union of production and consumption” [p55]; Mr. Toffler believes the union is being re-established. Movements toward regional food, roof-top solar energy, home schooling, home occupations and on-line shopping and selling reflect a more independent mood than found in the Second Wave household.
- The outdated ideas of the Second Wave are: standardization, specialization, synchronization, concentration, maximization and centralization. [p71] Customization will dominate the future.
- The nation-state was created to accommodate the ideas of the Second Wave with all of these institutional concepts. As the organizing ideas of the Second Wave deteriorate, the need for the nation-state is diminished. “It was the melding of...a unified political system and a unified economy that made the modern nation.” [p98]
- The Second Wave mentality “stands today as a key obstacle to the creation of a workable Third Wave civilization.” [p113]

### Third Wave Ideas for American Cities.

The Third Wave has yet to crash on shore, but Mr. Toffler offers his ideas about what to expect; again, as viewed from 1980:

- “...we must embrace – not dismiss – paradox and contradiction, hunch, imagination, and daring (through tentative) synthesis.” Trends “reach tipping points.” “For nothing will remain unchanged.” [p145] He believes “we stand on the edge of a new age of synthesis.”
- From his 1980s perch, Toffler believes the four economic clusters of the future will be: electronics and computers, the space industry, the exploration and mining of the seas and genetics. His 1980 forecast is remarkable if we remember that the PC was not invented until 1981, communism did not fall until 1989, Berners-Lee’s first internet went live in 1991 and the Human Genome Project did not sequence the entire DNA until 2003. He quotes the president of a genetics company saying “biology will replace chemistry in importance.” [p163]

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- Communication will change from the mass synthesization of information to smaller blips of information that individuals will synthesize for themselves. With a declining education system, will people be able to adequately interpret and get the right message from the “facts” they assemble?
- Mr. Toffler quotes Peter Ritner, author of *The Society of Space*, as he warns that we will “increasingly face crises that are not susceptible to ‘cause and effect analysis’ but would require ‘mutual dependence analysis’.” These solutions will be based on hundreds of “cooperating influences from dozens of independent, overlapping sources.” [p190]
- Specific traits of Third Wave civilization will be:
  - The “expanded family” will become society’s core institution taking back many functions outsourced in the Second Wave like economic self-sufficiency through a series of “temporary” jobs, child education, health care for family members and food production,
  - Smaller work units, many happening in the “electronic cottage”,
  - Child labor with more emphasis on “presumption” and home-based work places,
  - “The ecological approach and the systems approach overlapped and shared the same thrust toward synthesis and the integration of knowledge.” [319]
  - Cultural authenticity was subsumed by industrialization; but it will re-emerge as a force. [p346]
  - Mr. Toffler’s ideas portend the approach presented in ***The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*** by Jeffrey Sachs.
  - “If the emergent Third Wave society is not to be icily metallic, with a vacuum for a heart, it must attack this problem frontally. It must restore community.” [p385]
- The “three basic requirements of any individual: the need for community, structure and meaning.” [p383]
  - Loneliness is no longer an individual problem, but rather a public problem.
  - Structure and meaning can be provided, if no constructive alternatives are found, by drugs, cults, life-organizers, semi-cults.
  - Telecommunity will be a positive contribution to “community”.
  - Third Wave society may not need the virtues of the *Protestant Work Ethic* with its “emphasis on thrift, unremitting toil and the deferral of gratification.” [p398] A new virtue system is not provided by the author.
  - Mr. Toffler forecasts that children will no longer be the center of society due to the aging of the population. As of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this forecast has yet to be realized.
  - “As the Third Wave cuts across our society, work grows less, not more, repetitive. It becomes less fragmented, with each person doing a somewhat larger, rather than

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smaller, task. Flextime and self-pacing replace the old need for mass synchronization of behavior. Workers are forced to cope with more frequent changes in their tasks, as well as a binding succession of personal transfers, product changes and reorganizations.”

[p410]

- “What Third Wave employers increasingly need, therefore, are men and women who accept responsibility, who understand how their work dovetails with that of others, who can handle even larger tasks, who adapt swiftly to changed circumstances, and who are sensitively tuned into the people around them.” [p410]
- Matrix organizations and management systems meet the Third Wave needs.
- Mr. Toffler’s assumptions:
  - Individuals will vary more tomorrow than they do today,
  - Children will grow up sooner and show responsibility at an earlier age,
  - People will be more adaptable and have greater individuality being more likely to question authority,
  - Money will still be important, but not the *raison d’etre*.
- The last fifty pages deal with the mismatch of our governance system with the Third Wave societal needs. Many significant proposals are offered to re-align our government and society.
  - He doesn’t use the terms “minority – majority” or “majority – minority”, but he forecasts that minorities will be the prevalent grouping of society. Coalitions will be essential, consensus will be impossible to reach.
  - He reiterates that political power will move in two directions [p328]:
    - Global issues will require “transnational organizations and agencies”,
    - Sub-national groups [local governments] will become more important as the role of the nation-state subsides.

Despite his many warnings and reservations about the Third Wave’s impact and the dislocations to be found in the transition from the Second Wave, it appears Alvin Toffler is optimistic about the future.

**YouTube:** In addition to the reviews cited below, check out:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uATCYmLLxlg>

### Published Reviews

Slashdot, *The Third Wave* was reviewed by joshy

<http://books.slashdot.org/story/99/05/10/1824225/reviewthe-third-wave>

### “Overview

Alvin Toffler is an historian and futurist. In *The Third Wave* he presents an historical view of our two previous civilization types, a look at the new Third Wave economy, and an analysis of the conflicts that

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arise between the warring forces of these three civilization types as change sweeps across the globe. Now sure, we've all read the endless Wired articles about the New Economy with its virtuous circles, network effects, and general cyberiffic rosy view of the future, but this book is where it all came from. The truly amazing thing is that Toffler wrote *The Third Wave* almost 20 years ago, in an era before the World Wide Web, before the IBM PC, and before anyone knew that Vader was Luke's father. While some of the ideas never came to fruition, it remains an amazingly accurate picture of the future."

### ***Alvin Toffler and the Third Wave***

Reviewed by [Michael Finley](#), "America's best-loved business futurist"(TM)  
<http://www.skypoint.com/members/mfinley/toffler.htm>

#### *Excerpts of Finley's review:*

"The central premise of Toffler's talk was that human history, while it is complex and contradictory, can be seen to fit patterns. The pattern he has been seeing in his career takes the shape of three great advances or waves. The first wave of transformation began when some prescient person about 10,000 years ago, probably a woman, planted a seed and nurtured its growth. The age of agriculture began, and its significance was that people moved away from nomadic wandering and hunting and began to cluster into villages and develop culture."

"The second wave was an expression of machine muscle, the Industrial Revolution that began in the 18th century and gathered steam after America's Civil War. People began to leave the peasant culture of farming to come to work in city factories. It culminated in the Second World War, a clash of smokestack juggernauts, and the explosion of the atomic bombs over Japan."

"The power of the third wave has taken even the Tofflers by surprise. When they published *Future Shock* in 1971, they saw the knowledge age as an outgrowth of the industrial age that would require only a bit of fine tuning. They now see it as more revolutionary than that. The regime of the smokestacks has been toppled forever. What remains is still frothing and changing its shape. It is a whole new era, with dangers and opportunities uniquely its own."

#### **Google**

[http://books.google.com/books/about/The\\_Third\\_Wave.html?id=ViRmAAAAIAAJ](http://books.google.com/books/about/The_Third_Wave.html?id=ViRmAAAAIAAJ)

"The third wave offers a striking way out of today's despair, a bracing optimistic look at our new potential. It's a provocative glimpse into the future, with an array of astonishing informational facts about social problems and change."

**REVIEWER:** Bill Kercher, AICP, LEED®AP,

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