

BOOK REVIEW: THE THIRD WAVE

AUTHOR: ALVIN TOFFLER

Reviewed by Ankit Sanghani

Overview:

The Third Wave was written by Alvin Toffler in 1980. Alvin Toffler is an American writer and futurologist, known for his works discussing the digital revolution, communication revolution and technological singularity. Toffler is a former associate editor of Fortune magazine.

The Third Wave is a must-read book on futurology, and this book review is intended to wet the appetite of students of philosophy, history, management and sociology, who are planning to play an active part in business under the dynamic environment of the Information Economy (As Toffler denoted present time). The book presents a historical overview of the past two human civilizations, and projects & measures the third one that is in the process of coming out as change sweeps across the globe. Though the book revolves around society, culture, media, organisations, science and computers, its central premise is the transition of human history & human psychology, which has advanced three different types of societies in sequential order, with each wave pushing the older society and culture aside. But still each sequential wave is based on the previous one. The only ruling object of this world is time, and humanity is supposed to cope with it.

The first wave talks about the agrarian economy that began some thousand years ago. People used to make products for their own consumption individually, so there was no trading between people. People transitioned from hunting and wandering, to clustering and social culture. The first wave of change had not exhausted itself by the end of the seventeenth century.

The second wave talks about explosion of the industrial revolution colliding with all the institutions of the past and how it changed the way of life of millions. Mass production led to the birth of a new form of economy and the adoption of new managerial concepts such as economies of scale, corporations, standardizations, specializations, centralizations and synchronizations. By the end of the Second World War the globe started receiving signals of a gathering third wave based not on muscles but on mind.

The Third Wave is called the information or the knowledge age; however, other socio-political drivers like individual rights, freedoms, democracy and globalization of trade and movements of goods and services cannot be ignored. The key concepts of *The Third wave* are demassification and de-centralization and consumerism.

Review:

Waves: Salient Features

The First Wave, where agricultural civilization dominated the planet and seemed destined to do so forever.

Key features of *the first wave*:

- The land was the basis of economy, life, culture, family, structure and politics. The economy was decentralized and life was organised around the village.
- New type of conflicts arose among the farmers- Who owned which land? Who got to use available water? They taxed what was valuable, paying a large portion of their crops to a local strongman.
- Sources of power & energy: First wave civilization drew their energy from renewable living batteries i.e., human and animal muscle-power or from sun, wind and water.
- Inventions: First wave societies had relied on necessary inventions like winches and wedges, catapults, winepresses, levers and hoists that were chiefly used to human or animal muscle-power.
- Commerce & Trade: In First Wave societies, goods were normally made by handcraft methods. Products were created one at a time on custom basis. Products were largely distributed through ships and camel caravans.
- Communications: All human groups, from primitive times to today, depend on face-to-face, peer-to-peer communication.
- Product & Customer market: Until the industrial revolution, the vast bulk of all the food, goods and services produced by the producers themselves for their families or a tiny elite group who managed to scrape off the surplus for their own use. In most agricultural societies the great majority of people lived on a subsistence diet, growing just barely enough to keep their masters happy.
- Set up for next waves: First wave was a very long and slow process, and it took millions of years to reach the stage it was 300 years back. Gradually it had set up the stage for future waves. Three major innovations: 1) Accurate clocks, permitted the coordination of activities to a degree not possible before. 2) The printing press, permitted large-scale, accurate duplication and transmission of information across space and time. 3) The quest for farm implements led to new developments in metallurgy, specifically iron and steel.

The Second Wave, an era of industrial revolution and another breakthrough; it was not a one-time event but a wave of change moving at a certain velocity. The industrial revolution took more than 300 years to mature and since then, all societies accelerated their economies by using energy from irreplaceable fossil fuels through dipping into the earth's energy reserves. Second wave societies started utilizing the sources of energies as it would be endlessly available. Industrialization required mobility from people. The nuclear families became the standard, socially approved modern model of families around the globe. Human life was split into two halves: production and consumption. Higher the consumption had been the real business doing source for producers and business people.

Key attributes of *the second wave*:

- Standardization of things in all aspects; education, production, pay scale, lunch hours, holidays, weights and measures, currency, prices, language and lifestyle.
- Specialization: The old style workman was removed. People started specializing in particular things or areas and the market itself had been demanding specialization because people were now looking for the change in all they were used to.
- Synchronization: The close interdependence of labour and high cost machinery required a much more refined synchronization. If one task was not done on time in a

plant then subsequent tasks were to be delayed. Punctuality was never required in agriculture and now in the second wave it became a social necessity and clocks and watches became proliferate.

- Concentration of Energy, Money and Power: Society became totally dependent on highly concentrated deposits of fossil fuel. The wave also concentrated population, stripping the countryside of people and relocating them in giant urban centres. Energy, money and power all were concentrated.
- Maximization: The Second Wave became synonymous with efficiency, and maximization became the key principle.
- Centralization: To accomplish all the tasks, a new form of organization based on centralization of information and command were created. The pressure towards political centralization were even stronger and industrialization pushed the political system towards greater centralized, increasing government power and responsibilities and monopolizing decision-making.
- Imperialism: In the second wave, rapid and massive march of imperialism came into picture which exploited their resources and market and brought wealth to the European countries. IMF, WORLD BANK and GATT were three main institutes that stepped up to gain control over world economy.
- Behavioural change: The belief and thoughts of the new generation of industrialization was changed and hence the market developed.

The Third Wave- The new synthesis is the era of post industrialization and it was started after the Second World War. Toffler coined many words to define *the third wave*. Information Age was one such term. It is powerfully driven by information technology and worldwide demand of freedom and individuality. For this wave, the raw material was information.

Key characteristics of *the third wave*:

- New Technologies: Innovations in electronics, computers, and space science boosted the industries and a new form of industry came into existence. Things that were once a myth had started becoming reality.
- Sea- The new road: We now have strong relationships with seas. Oil reservoirs and world hunger is now being fulfilled through the sea and man is no more relying on a single resource.
- Genetics: Doubling with rapid speed. Higher production of food, wool and other natural goods has been possible through genetic science. Biological alteration has been possible in *the third wave*.
- De-massification of media: New media aimed at small and specific groups of local markets, special interests and regional markets. People have started paying attention to only those things which they are related to and which are beneficial for them.
- A new social memory: Libraries and computers have been new artificial memory for mankind. People have started recording activities in the same manner so that it can be seen and played millions of time.
- Family system: In *the first wave*, mates were working together to survive, then in *the second wave* nuclear family system was idealized which is now falling apart.

CONCLUSION:

A new civilization is forming but where do we fit into it? Don't today's technological changes and social upheavals mean the end of friendship, love, commitment, community, and caring? Won't tomorrow's electronic marvels make human relationships even vacuous and vicarious than they are today? To create a fulfilling emotional life and a sane psychosphere for the emerging civilization of tomorrow, we must recognize three basic requirements of any individual: the needs for community, structure and meaning. In my view, from the explained hierarchy of the human psychology by Toffler, we will have to consider the reasons for the fall of the first and second wave, and in accordance to that, we will have to design our new psychological environment for us, for our children, for children of *the third wave* and children of new Information Age.

I believe nothing is permanent; with the time even truth is being changed. People have created new Gods for their convenience. Just for the sake of survival we have created religion in the journey of thousands of years. So even if something is ideal today, don't get misguided by the truth of this generation. Truth will be changed before a decade comes to an end. So future managers, marketers and economists will have to act accordingly and will have to do their research keeping Change in Human Psychology as their core area of study.