

Herman Kahn: An Appreciation

JOSEPH COATES

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HERMAN KAHN IS AMONG A HANDFUL OF PARAMOUNT figures in contemporary futures research. His accomplishments have been so widely celebrated and acknowledged that this appreciation reflects on a different aspect of his life's work, highlighting some weaknesses, shortfalls and gaps. The purpose is not to damage, much less smash the icon. Rather it is to suggest cautionaries for those who would emulate this great futurist, so that they can build on his successes and move us all to even greater successes for the commonweal.

Personal conservatism is a most striking feature of Kahn's outlook. He saw tremendous family risks in drugs and alcohol, in uncontrolled sexual activities, and other so familiar social changes. These hostile attitudes, which amounted to personal fears, restricted his view of changing social values and the good they could lead to.

Kahn is perhaps most well known for his early great achievement in the development of the escalation ladder. He showed that it was not a simple matter of nuclear war or no nuclear war, but rather that countries in conflict could select or move to one of many gradations within a spectrum of hostilities. Understanding those gradations led to new subtlety in every aspect of military and strategic thinking. There is no doubt that the escalation ladder had a profound effect on American, NATO, and presumably Soviet strategic thinking about nuclear and more conventional conflict.

At the same time, that approach cut his thinking off from radical alternatives to the questions of war and peace. While he perfected the scenario approach to dealing across the spectrum of possibilities between polar positions, it virtually precluded his development of a third or fourth polar position radically different from the assumed two extremes.

As a macro thinker, perhaps the most macro of the both professional and popular futurists, Kahn often dealt with grand outcomes, large-scale alternatives, and pictures of countries, regions, and activities that he saw as having a high potential for success. This unrelenting good news reflects a widespread phenomenon that we have observed among futurists: that they are all at the core optimists.

On the other hand, they are often pessimistic in the short run. The net result of that is that many futurists operate on a pattern of thinking that argues we will be saved and moved into the great bright new world if and only if you follow the prescription that is offered in their work.

To some extent, Kahn followed that same strategy with a more subtle and beguiling variation. He argued repeatedly that we could move into a positive future, whether it was the future of Australia or the future of world peace, if we did not botch the job. That caveat is the crippling weakness in much of his systemic optimism. By being a thinker on a grand scale, he tended to ignore three considerations. First, the numerous ways in which the job could be botched were rarely, if ever, discussed. Second, the specific institutional, organizational, social and political mechanisms that would have to be brought to bear to prevent that botching were usually ignored. As we all know, the devil is in the details, which he rarely faced. Third, he generally had little or no regard for the broad range of stakeholders in any complex situation. We take stakeholders to be those who are affected by a system or who in turn affect it. Consequently, his analyses tended to lack any political, organizational or social subtlety. Many of his optimistic analyses ranked with the classic story of belling the cat. Great concept, but who's going to carry the bell and tie the knot?

The concentration on the macro, aside from leading to an indifference towards the micro, also limited the broad sweep of forces that he brought into play. By and large, he had a rather conventional view of the role of women in society, whether on a national, that is, US, or global basis. It would be an anachronism to call Kahn a sexist, considering the period in which he flourished. Yet, his indifference to the role of women has to be a conspicuous shortfall. Similarly, he paid little attention to the role of minority groups in the American political situation, to which most of his work was directed. To a surprising extent, he was also indifferent to environmental issues until the Meadows' work, and then he only dealt with it in broad, vague strokes.

Kahn created the Hudson Institute, which survives and even thrives in its new home in Indianapolis (*editor's note: in June 2004, The Hudson Institute moved its headquarters to Washington, D.C.*). He managed to surround himself with a number of people who became extensions of his own persona and both fed into and thrived on his conceptual thinking. Unfortunately, what he failed to do was to

create a cadre of disciples. One could argue that his great success with scenarios and the current vogue of scenarios as an institutional planning tool can be traced directly back to Kahn. Whether or not that is true, it still does not get around the point that there are no Kahnian disciples, there is no Kahnian school, there is no conceptual methodological framework he developed that others follow through with. Many would attribute this to the putative fact that he practiced what some people call genius forecasting, that is, his complexity and subtlety of mind was such that what he did in his head could not be described, much less taught and imitated. We reject that notion. Genius forecasting is real in some people, but with care, what actually goes on in the genius's mind can be described rationally, taught and used as a basis for recruitment into the profession. After all, we now have expert systems, which as a field of artificial intelligence, does just that.

For a futurist, there is a curious absence of radical thinking on Kahn's part. To a substantial degree, that absence of radical thinking shows up in the absence of fresh or striking institutional concepts-social inventions. It shows up even more strikingly in the place where radical outcomes are most readily perceived-in the future developments and consequences of science and technology.

The 100 or so technological innovations expected in the last third of the 20th century in his 1967 *The Year 2000* is a curious mixture, about a quarter of which deal with developments in information technology. Presented as they are, in single sentence format, they lose most of the subtlety that one would have hoped for. For example, he definitely missed the high risk of structural unemployment that we are witnessing. Information technology first wiped out large numbers of factory workers and is now beginning to have the same effect with information workers and middle managers. The presentation of the technical development does an injustice to the social consequences.

More important, however, many things are proposed that, from the perspective of 30 years ago, would still seem unsubstantial, such as human hibernation for relatively extended periods, planned and perhaps programmed dreams, and cyborg devices. Many of these unrealistic forecasts seem to betray a fundamental lack of understanding of scientific developments, their limitations, and the enormous problems in their institutionalization.

Throughout, the term "value-free" is used by Kahn to suggest the nature of many of his forecasts,

but, as was well known at the time he wrote and coming out of sociological research, virtually nothing that involves the human enterprise is value-free. The claim of value-free left him without the need for any recourse to alternative mechanisms of quality control.

One of the most striking features of Kahn's work is that it fails to draw on the work of other people. Few of his works explain any method by which quality has been maintained. In sharp contrast to that, we see that the general move for the past 30 years in futures research has been for the research to be more transparent and more public. That is, the recipient, the user, the reader is increasingly informed about the method or techniques by which the work was generated and increasingly is expected to share the feeling that he or she both understands the methods and would have come to similar conclusions had they been able to pursue the subject in the way described. Furthermore, the best of futures research today is public in that it is subject to review and evaluation by the appropriate spectrum of diverse people, during and throughout its creation, lending legitimacy and credibility to what is presented. Kahn worked in the narrow orbit of feeling that he or he and his associates created everything in their work with little or no acknowledgment of either past work they built on or false beliefs that they undercut, contradicted or neutralized. Other areas of scholarship do acknowledge on whom they are building and make that acknowledgment a part of unfolding intellectual history, at least in the Western world.

Finally, perhaps the most serious flaw in Kahn's work is its presentation implicitly, if not explicitly, as forecasts of future states of society. There is no doubt that the scenarios are intended to present real potential outcomes. A great deal of argument has centered around the soundness and reliability of those forecasted outcomes. Yet, as we see it, the primary purpose of the study of the future is not to forecast that this will occur or that will not occur, or that such and such will happen by so and so time with this and that probability. While all that specificity has some value and engages wide interest, the primary value in the study of the future is to accomplish three things. First is to widen the user or the participants' horizons by making them aware of things likely to influence their concerns. Second is to give them advice, clues and information as to how to relate those future developments to their present actions. Finally, and most important of all, is to pry out of the reader, user or recipient of the futures work an awareness of their assumptions about the future so

that those assumptions can be examined, questioned, challenged, and perhaps changed. Kahn certainly does well on the first of those three points. He falters on the second, and he really pays no attention to the third. His approach does not push him to be explicit about the assumptions he brings to the study of a particular future situation.

Perhaps all in all, the limitations and shortfalls of Kahn's work on the future result from a strain of non-rationality in this apparently most rational of men.