

Tomorrow's People

The Liberals, Labour and the Conservatives have, at last, all joined the Internet, but do any of the traditional parties have the answer to how our society might progress in the next century? Sean Clark investigates some of the 'alternatives' with a look at the more unusual views that make up 'millennium culture'.

Above: Artwork from Timothy Leary's Web site, found at <http://Intac.com/~dimitri/dh/learywilson.html>.



Imagery from Robert Anton Wilson's Web page, <http://Intac.com/~dimitri/dh/learywilson.html>.

Did you know there's a theory that reckons the end of a century can trigger a cultural frenzy that results in a kind of 'end of century madness'? This phenomena, is said to be characterised by a rise in apocalyptic cults and religions, a crossover of previously 'underground' beliefs into the mainstream and a general feeling that something more than just a change of calendars is imminent. It's as if the countdown to a new century causes us to forsake some of our rationality and triggers something deep down in our psychological make-up that tells us that the end of such a long period of history will inevitably lead to some kind of dramatic event: be it a second coming, UFOs landing at the Whitehouse, or even a 'New Age' transformation of society into the next 'Golden Age'.

This theory may sound a little odd (especially when written in the pages of an Internet magazine), but before you start wondering if all my hours on the Net have lead me to totally loose my grip on the 'real world', think about it. As we tumble towards the 21st century (not just the end of a century, but the end of a millennium) strange

things are indeed happening. Apocalyptic cults are very much in vogue, and some – such as Waco's Branch Davidians or the Japanese group responsible for the Tokyo gas attack – have even achieved international notoriety through their destructive activities.

What's more, archaic belief systems such as Paganism and Shamanism and esoteric religions are becoming increasingly popular – even if they are still grouped somewhat mockingly under the 'New Age' banner by much of the mainstream press. And end-of-the-world prophets seem to be everywhere: from the Nun who predicted that the recent Jupiter/comet collision would result in a chain reaction that would lead to the destruction of the Earth (she seems to have gone very quiet recently), to a certain ex-goalkeeper who once suggested that turquoise tracksuits may be our only protection from the forthcoming cataracts of time, to psychedelic visionaries, such as Terrance McKenna, who believe that the Eschaton is almost here (due in 2012, I think!) and that "we are about to witness the greatest release of compressed change since the beginning of the Universe".



Also, and in contrast to those who see the end of the century being linked to some kind of end-of-the-world event, there are others who see imminent end-of-century change being the product of accelerating scientific progress. People such as the Extropians believe that science will shortly be able to solve almost all of the world's problems – poverty, AIDS, cancer, even death. An optimistic view don't you think? Add to this the 'Oceanians', who want to establish a 21st century sea-based community akin to a 'New Atlantis', other 'futurists' who look to the next millennium as the beginning of a 'New Age' and you have a rather interesting set of beliefs and world views that some have started to call a 'millennium culture'.

Now, perhaps this millennium culture is simply a manifestation of 'end of century madness', but there certainly seems to be a lot of this weirdness about! What's more, a great number of the issues of interest to these 1990's futurists are being discussed on the Net. Be it via newsgroups, Web sites or emailing lists, droves of people are publicly rejecting conventional politics and accepted world views and are getting very excited about what they see as 'the next transition'.

Live Forever With the Extropians.

Take the Extropians, this loose grouping of neo-anarchists, libertarians and techno-advocates have a strong Internet presence which they use to spread their ideas about the future of society and cultural development.

The group, which aims to defy a rigid definition by being staunchly anti-dogmatic, believe that technological progress will soon allow us to free ourselves from the problems of modern society. An important technology for Extropians is so-called 'nanotechnology' – the atomic scale machines that Extropians believe will one day be able to enter our cells and repair damage, including the effects of ageing. Many also see cryonics – the freezing of the dead with the hope that a future society will be able to revive them – as a viable technology that will allow them to become immortal and 'beat entropy'. Other Extropian interests include smart-drugs (chemicals that aim to boost intelligence), life extension through diet and exercise and the 'uploading' of human consciousness from our 'meat brains' into advanced computers.

As well as advocating technological solutions to problems – problems that even they admit others think don't exist! – many Extropians also have well-thought-out political views about how society could operate in the next millennium. They see new communication technologies as having the potential to significantly reduce the need for centralised government by allowing people to 'self organise' and trade internationally through digital cash and other forms of electronic money.

While many Extropian beliefs may seem odd – or even elitist and right-wing – I think this latter set of ideas may

actually have a great deal of mileage in the next century. After all, where Extropians excel is in their aim to encourage people to think of ways in which new technologies – including the Internet – might change society for the better. And while some mainstream political parties have attempted to deal with this issue by adding a 'techno-gloss' to some of their policies, it's only new groups such as the Extropians who have begun to address technological impact fully by attempting to formulate an entirely new belief system and political model around technological progress. If you want to find out more about the Extropians then point your Web browser at <http://www.c2.org/~arkuat/extr/> or access their alt.extropians Usenet newsgroup, alternatively simply search your favourite directory with the keyword 'extropian'.



Nanotechnology

Imagine human-made machines constructed not out of large plastic, wooden or metal materials but instead out of individual atoms – this is the goal of

Nanotechnology. The technology has been talked about by scientists since the late 1950s, but only recently has it become possible to manufacture on the atomic scale. While current nano-machines are extremely simple – not much more than cogs and wheels – it is believed that within the next 20 years it may be possible to construct far more complex items that will contain powerful computers, be self-powering and motivating and may even be able to reproduce themselves! With governments and industry investing huge sums of money in Nanotechnology the Extropian idea of using nano-machines to repair human cell damage and to assist our immune system may not be that far fetched. One of the best nano-tech pages on the Net is <http://nano.xerox.com/nano/>. There is also a sci.nanotechnology newsgroup.

Oceania: The New Atlantis?

You might say that a way of taking this belief in the future one step further is to look at



The logo for the Extropians.

Live surrounded by dolphins, with the proposed Oceania.





The End is Nigh

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If all this positive thinking about the future by the Extropians and Oceanians is getting too much for you then you might want to reassure yourself that things may actually get worse rather than better by tuning into the alt.destroy.the.earth newsgroup. This group is populated by bands of nerds, students and anti-environmentalists who exchange various ideas for destroying the Earth. Ideas range from sending out space probes in the shape of various obscene hand gestures with the aim of aggravating any watching aliens, to producing rocket engines that will propel the Earth towards the Sun and encouraging the use of more CFCs (a bit too close to the bone to be amusing). Doom and gloom merchants also have alt.destroy.the.internet and alt.destroy.microsoft in case they want some more 'manageable' targets to aim at...

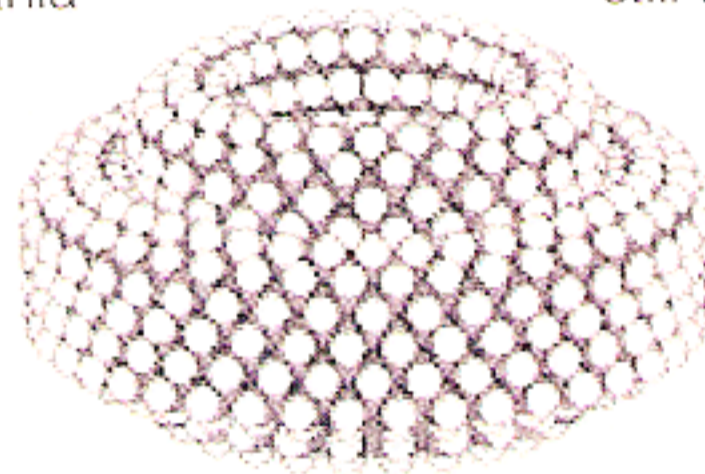
Establishing your own country based upon your 'millennium culture' or Extropian principles. And this is exactly what the Oceania project aims to do!

While not linked directly to the Extropians, the people behind the Oceania project share many similar ideas, a belief in the power of new technology, a desire for individual freedom and, a rather right-wing or elitist streak that I for one find a bit unnerving. However, as with the Extropians, much of what they say is of great interest and very thought provoking.

Basically, the goal of the Oceanians is to establish "a new country named Oceania. This country will be devoted to the value of freedom, and will first exist as a sea city in the Caribbean." Many of the plans for this city have been worked-out on the Internet and if you connect to their Web site at <http://oceania.org/> you will find a written constitution, an explanation of the legal system and computer-generated images of the proposed city. You can even place orders for your very own Oceanian passport – just a few hundred pounds will give you the right to live in Oceania when it becomes a 'reality'!

While I don't doubt the sincerity of the people behind the Oceania project I do find their goals rather over ambitious (mind you,

compared to 'life extension' they might seem rather tame!). However, if you look at what they are doing as an example of how a large international group of people can work together via the Internet to discuss radical solutions to social and political issues, then it becomes a bit more interesting. Quite simply, give large numbers of individuals communication technology and a common purpose and they may well come up with completely new ideas for better ways to live in the future. Some might seem totally off-the-wall or idealistic, but some may actually work.



Techno-Pagans and Cyber-Shamens

If Extropians and Oceanians sit at the 'rational' and


scientific end of the millennium culture spectrum then the 'Techno-Pagans' and 'Cyber-Shamans' must surely sit it the opposite more 'mystical' end.

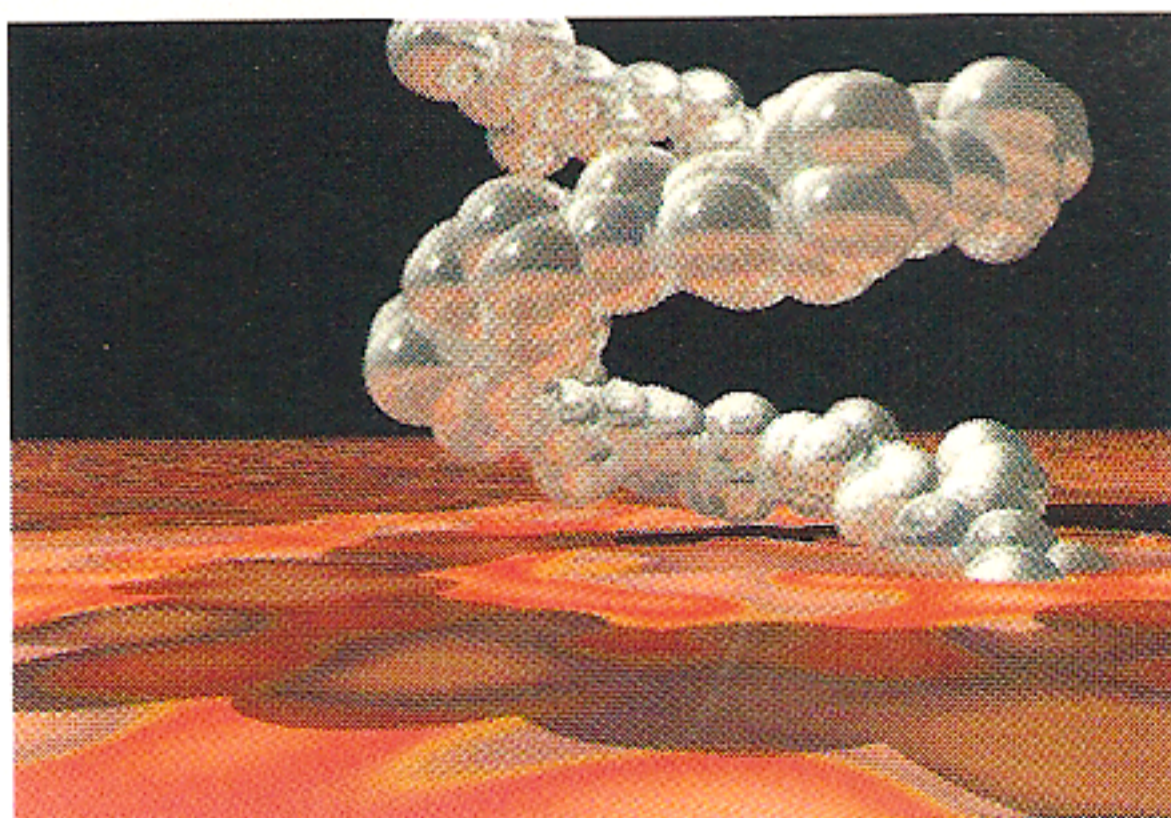
Both of these viewpoints aim to combine ancient beliefs with modern technology to produce a world view that mixes the best of the mythical past with some of the better things recent society has delivered. Hence, a Techno-Pagan may talk in terms of a world in which all life is a product of the Goddess and computers and networks form the 'planetary nervous system'. These views may well seem like 1990's hippie ramblings – and maybe they are – but, as mentioned before, many people find them very attractive and, end-of-century-madness or not, they may well soon start entering the mainstream (have a look at the newsgroup rec.religion.shamanism or Pagan Link at <http://www.tardis.ed.ac.uk/~feorag/paganlink/plhome.html> for more information).

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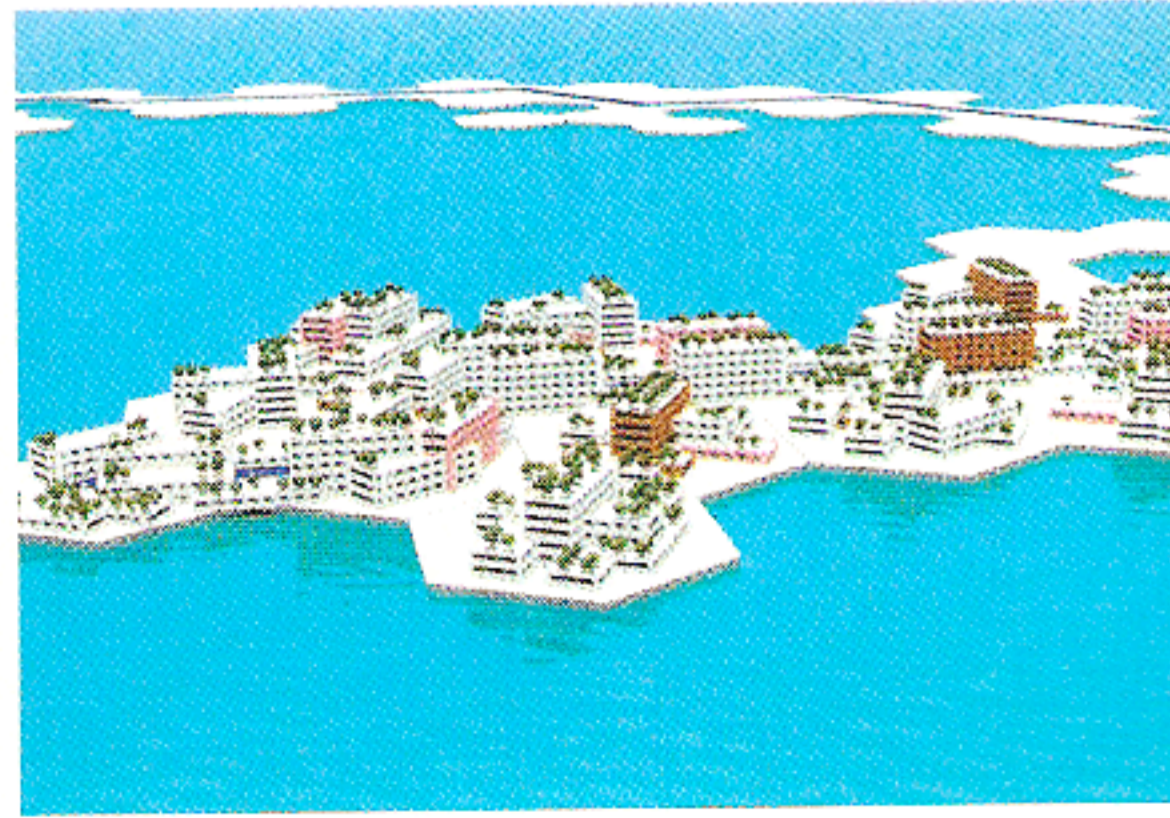
Before I end this tour around the 'New Edge' it's probably worth mentioning a couple of individuals who have done more than most in encouraging people to think beyond the everyday world. The first is the granddaddy of alternative culture and psychedelic experimenter Dr. Timothy Leary. Leary's escapades in the 1960s and 1970s lead to many brushes with the law and even a spell in prison. His views and activities (which included the Extropian idea of trying to boost 'intelligence' through chemicals – although his preferred chemical later became rather illegal!) have become infamous and it's perhaps a testament to just how seriously his ideas are still taken in some quarters in that he must be the only 75-year-old who is barred from this country for his views!

The second is writer Robert Anton Wilson whose highly popular works have 'tuned' many people 'in' to alternative world views and have fuelled numerous late-night debates! If this article has left you wanting to know more about these people then a good starting point is the Timothy Leary and Robert Anton Wilson page at <http://www.intac.com/~dimitri/dh/learywilson.html>. A word of warning though, prepare to have your views challenged if you do decide to visit these pages!

Be it the start of a new golden age or the gateway to the apocalypse, it seems that the end of the century is being seen by many as the trigger for some kind of major social or planetary change. Much of this may be – quite simply – nothing more than drippy utopian talk. But I think it's probably fair to say that at least some of the ideas introduced here will end up becoming commonplace views in the not-too-distant future... 



Could we use nano-machines to repair human cell damage.



Get your Oceanian passport now, so that you can live there when it becomes a reality.



Timothy Leary, one of the first to have views on alternative cultures.