Future Crime

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Does anyone recall that back in the 1930s F. D. R. set up a blue ribbon panel of science advisors and asked them to report on the most likely major scientific developments to come in the next 25 years? Their finished report made no mention of rocketry, computers or atomic energy—enough to make any prophet leery.

Now, all three items were capable of benefitting the world greatly during those next 25 years. All three items were also, of course, subject to abuse. And all three items were, indeed, abused. Yet, in the longer run, they have benefitted mankind.

I have reviewed the preceding essays in this series, and I’ve seen an impressive list of bright possibilities, baring major catastrophes and blunders. A stable population, sexual equality, longer life and increased leisure seem desirable, especially when accompanied by clean alternative energy sources (say, fusion plants and power satellites), with an increased shifting of tedious chores to computerized servants.

Many beneficial things could come of this projected leisure. Handcrafted items, for instance, would be increasingly desirable in a world of mass production, thus providing a fine outlet for the manually creative. With less pressure to get places in a hurry (so much business being transactable from the home with increased communications potential), we might see a revolution in travel, such as a return of the clean, leisurely dirigible. We might also witness an upswing in continuing education—people picking up the liberal arts courses they hadn’t had time for when learning more technical skills.

I could go on and turn this entire column into such a list. But, as a student of history, something else occurs to me. Anything exploitable will be exploited.

I am thinking of the future of crime.

If I were, at present, a successful criminal and my son expressed a desire to follow in my footsteps, I would send him off to get an education in engineering and computer science. Almost everyone I know with such a background has stories of people figuring ways to beat the system using those skills; of crediting accounts improperly, stealing time, crashing programs, altering grades by piercing the school’s records system, or placing free phone calls with “black box”-type gimmicks. I’ve heard amazing electronic crime stories from bankers which I will not detail here.

And, of course, programs themselves can be stolen, systems penetrated and data stolen, et cet, et cet. The potential for the criminal exploitation of a highly computerized world is immense—and to quote John Gall, “When a fail-safe system fails, it fails by failing to fail-safe.” This does not seem so far-fetched as it might when someone is actively seeking to circumvent the system’s safeguards.

I’ve a feeling that with increased security, crimes against the individual may well fall off—and this, of course, would be a very good thing. But when any system or organization gets big and depersonalized, people tend to feel a lot less guilty about ripping it off. It is the “white collar crime” syndrome, even if we won’t be wearing white collars then. There is a natural human tendency—which I find laudable, a mark of the primate ingenuity which has brought us as far as we have come—to attempt, often successfully, to find ways to beat any system, whether or not one actually intends to do it. And then…

I (who have had a book go out of print prematurely because of an incorrect computer instruction) can see nonviolent hijackings managed by the intentional misrouting of goods, the instructions later doctored. I can see phony orders, phony receipts, phony accounts. I can see entire corporations existing only on printouts. Several books have already been written on these subjects.

Enough. In a number of instances today, people who have done such things, rather than being prosecuted, have been hired as troubleshooters by their victims. Hopefully, they make it more difficult for the next guy.

In this column, Ben Bova pointed out the dangers of a hostage power satellite. Consider fusion plants down here on the surface of Earth. According to my Los Alamos informant, these plants would likely be the size of a small city and there would not have to be an enormous number of them. What does that suggest? Strategically, if we were relying on them exclusively for power and if even one of them were put out of commission, it would make the New York Blackout look like very small beer. Who would do such a thing?

The point I am aiming at is that for every addition to the complexity of society some new means of criminal exploitation will suggest itself to someone. I do not see any way around this, because it is in the nature of the human animal to try to solve problems. Any new situation causes someone to look for an angle. Science fiction writers do it all the time—in pleasant, socially acceptable ways, I hasten to add.

Will the future see people living longer? I think so. Will we wipe out V. D. as we have smallpox—once the hangups surrounding such a public health project have been outgrown—thus, finally taking all the danger out of being close? I think so. Will our current lifestyle be the subject of a nostalgia kick one day? Probably. Will we mine the asteroids, have labs in space, a base on the Moon and well-populated O’Neill colonies? It seems likely. Will we wipe out crime? I doubt it. Is this a bad thing? Again, I doubt it. Society has always absorbed its losses from theft and continued on.

If there is a decline in violent crimes against people I think we will be coming out ahead of the game. The others, the sophisticated crimes coming from more sophisticated criminals in a more sophisticated society, should, when detected, serve to strengthen the systems they offend against—and this, too, is a kind of growth.

If the human race ever loses the tendency to scheme against the system, we will be in bad shape. It is another aspect of this same quality that helps us to keep the system itself in line and, if it becomes unbearable, to find ways of destroying it. It is a part of the human survival mechanism, and we know of no way to selectively stifle it.

And when most of the bugs in new systems have been stepped on, of course the very next development to come along will provide new opportunities for exploitation. It will be a fascinating time in which to be a cop. Security systems of all sorts will be good investments.

Can you imagine the following Adam-12 episode?

A sinister-appearing individual sits before a computer terminal. He checks some papers and encodes instructions.

CUT TO: Two cops sitting in a similar room elsewhere, drinking coffee and talking about the girls/guys on O’Neill II. A buzzer sounds, a telltale light appears on their console. They encode a “tail” for the illegal program, following, recording and canceling it, while tracing its origin.

A number flashes on the CRT. They dial it and turn it over to the arrest program.

CUT TO: Sinister-looking person answering his/her phone.

“You are under arrest. These are your rights…” says the recording. “If you attempt to flee custody, your credit account will be canceled. We are now shutting down your terminal. Will you report to your local Precinct at 9:30 tomorrow morning?”

“Could you make it 10:30? I have a dental implant appointment then.”

“Surely.”

“Thank you.”

Click.

CUT TO: The cops, who log it and discuss the latest weather-control foul-up. Wouldn’t it be something if some vandal had gotten to the Weather Exchange Teleoperator (WET) and was about to threaten the city with a storm during the tickertape parade for the astronauts returning from Titan? Nonsense. Nonsense? Better run it through and see if it could be done…

Click.

The future, as I see it, holds many such “clicks.”

As with Roosevelt’s think tank, though, there must be a lot that we are missing/have missed, both in science fiction and among professional futurologists. There is the wondrous, serendipitous shaping of the future by the billions of little decisions Fred Pohl referred to in this column. Who knows what inspired future criminal is being shaped by them at this very moment? And in what strange fashion?

And then there are always the big unguessable imponderables, such as the possibility of our encountering or communicating with an alien race. Now, there may be criminally exploitable possibilities there that would make our most satisfying conglomerate-shuffling look like petty shoplifting. We may have a lot to learn from them, but then we may have a lot to teach them, too.

In the abstract—in the future, in the past—notions such as these can always be treated humorously. But when the future comes it will of course be the present, and it will be prudent if you recall that every new thing under the Sun provides an opening for an abuse as old as society, at least for a little while…and there will always be another.

Keep your hands on your credit cards, or whatever they’re using. And never play cards with a computer named DOC.

Notes

Preceding essays in this series refers to the monthly column “Tomorrow” in Future Life, of which this essay was a part; Zelazny mentions prior columns by Frederik Pohl and Ben Bova. Author John Gall analyzed systems theory in Systemantics, also known as The Systems Bible. Physicist Gerard K. O’Neill designed a mass driver and a human space habitat called the O’Neill Cylinder. The television police drama Adam-12 ran from 1968 to 1975. And never play cards with a computer named DOC alludes to “three rules of life” from Nelson Algren’s 1956 A Walk on the Wild Side: “Never play cards with a man called Doc. Never eat at a place called Mom’s. Never sleep with a woman whose troubles are worse than your own.”