

Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age

By Peter D. Hershock.

Published by State University of New York, Albany, 1999.

Tom Graham

p.183

Reinventing the Wheel is basically a long and subjective argument in favor of "community" and "interrelatedness." The argument is drawn from the premise that modern technology has robbed us of too much of our attention; attention that used to be put into community building. The author, Peter D. Hershock, offers Buddhist concepts of karma and selflessness, among others, as solutions to this problem. In the main, this argument is familiar to most people. Hershock makes it interesting by supporting his claims with detailed analyses of many of the things that make modern life what it is.

In his introduction Hershock states his case like this: "In what follows, I want to argue that the rapid spread of high-tech media is adversely related to the ideal of cultural diversity, not because of their explicit content or the varied intentions directing their use, but rather because of the way in which they tacitly reconfigure our awareness as such." (xii)

This "reconfiguration of awareness" is described as a sort of "colonization" of the mind. The media is the colonizer, our minds are the colony, while our "attention-energy" is the natural resource that is being drained from us. In another metaphor, Hershock compares the values that permeate the media to germs. He says that such Western values as "individuality" and "autonomy" are like the "germs" carried by European sailors that "killed off four out of every five native Hawaiians in a matter of a generation or two."

Colonization of awareness is not something that only non-Western societies must suffer. Hershock says that all of us do. He says that TV generally is deadening to all of us, not because of the "explicit program material" of TV, but because of "...the technology of mass mediation, the way it structures our conduct and consciousness and captures our attention-energy." (208)

In the case of professional sports, "The immense popularity of professional sports...signals not just the dearth of drama and personal meaning in our own, immediate lives, but the successful commodification of both meaning and drama." (204)

In the case of health care, he says "...institutionalized medicine actually precipitates a recession of responsive resources throughout a served population."(121)

Though I am inclined to agree with many of the parts of Hershock's argument, I am not convinced by the whole. Hershock says that the Western values of personhood are "in opposition to those prevailing in cultures where appreciative contribution-and not control-is taken as the nexus of all technical values; where relationship-and not individuality-is understood and valued as irreducible; where communication is not the successful exchange of information, but the harmonious sharing of a common perspective..."

I wonder. In much of the world "relationship-and not individuality" is the stuff of abuse, while "communication" all too often is the communicating of commands.

Hershock says that "Relinquishing our obsession with objective control and practicing instead the art of seeing things as enlightening and worthy of limitless appreciation directly orients us away from 'things' toward the originally ambiguous narration of which they are but conceptual, emotional, or perceptual abstractions."

I agree with this, but for me "limitless appreciation" only really began the day I moved out of a small community "where relationship-and not individuality" was the prevailing norm; in the case of that community, alcohol and dominance by a few individuals set the "relational" tone for everyone else. I suspect that this is the case in much of the world and that it always has been the case. Modern media may carry some destructive germs, but it also carries

information that allows us to dramatically improve our lives.

Hersbock says that Buddhist practice offers a way of liberating our minds from the colonization of the mass media. He says that if we learn to practice sort of Zen mindfulness and "...place our attention-energy into appreciating rather than controlling our circumstances-and so the people and things sharing in our narration-our lives will be naturally and dramatically enriched." (275)

I have no argument with that at all. Reinventing the Wheel is an interesting book. Hersbock deserves praise for having written it. It contains many solid ideas and many original insights into the nature of modern life. Hersbock writes with an engaging mixture of passion and intelligence. Readers interested in thinking about the mass media will find many things of interest in this book.

Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age by Peter D. Hoshock is recommended for those who are interested in the philosophy of mass media.