TRIUMPH *of the* MUNDANE

THE UNSEEN TRENDS THAT SHAPE OUR LIVES AND ENVIRONMENT

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ISLAND PRESS
Washington, D.C. ♦ Covelo, California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kane, Hal.
Triumph of the mundane : the unseen trends that shape our lives and environment / Hal Kane.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-55963-715-3
1. Environmental degradation. 2. Nature—Effect of human beings on. 3. Human ecology. I. Title.
GE140 .K36 2001
304.2'8—dc21
00-011702

Printed on recycled, acid-free paper 

Printed in Canada
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acknowledgments

As always, more people deserve thanks than ever can be thanked. First, however, deep appreciation goes to the Ford Foundation, whose grant financed the writing of this book as well as the research and development of some of its ideas. The Ford Foundation, as everyone knows, has a long and impressive history of making such grants, and its support of Redefining Progress and organizations like it has had remarkable value.

The individuals who have reviewed draft copies of this manuscript, or who have contributed substantially to it in other ways, include Jeff Rivkin, Mark Valentine, Craig Rixford, Cliff Cobb, Durwood Zaelke, Alan AtKisson, Norman Myers, Jonathan Rowe, Peter Barnes, and Terrence McNally. Their time and insight are appreciated greatly. Without such colleagues, writing is not only more difficult but also much less rewarding.

Special thanks go to Todd Baldwin, my editor at Island Press, who has contributed enormously to this manuscript. And, of course, thanks go to all of the people at Island Press who have done the crucial work of promotion, layout and design, and all aspects of its production. Without their energy and work, there could be no book.

Several other institutions have been important to this effort as well. Part of the manuscript was written at the Mesa Refuge, a writers' retreat in Pt. Reyes Station, California, dedicated to the exploration of the connections between ourselves, nature, and our economy and society.

All of the people at the Worldwatch Institute deserve thanks for their years of work to develop the thinking and the information available about the world's environmental, social, and economic issues. The idea behind this book began to be formed in my mind during the five years I spent at

Worldwatch, in Washington, D.C., researching and writing about economics, hunger, the environment, and refugees.

Redefining Progress, which recently moved from San Francisco to a new home in Oakland, California, has provided a home for thinking about topics like the speed of society, the inadequacy of the GDP as a measure of well-being, and other fundamental but alternative topics of public policy. These issues deserve much greater attention from the mainstream media and our public institutions, and we are fortunate to have an organization like Redefining Progress to try to broaden the attention received by such topics. Its sponsorship of this book is, of course, greatly appreciated.

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Introduction

The Physical and Private Changes That Have Shaped America

At 224 years of age, the United States is one of the oldest countries in the world. It is older than Italy, which was a group of independent city-states whose peoples spoke different dialects as recently as 120 years ago. It is more enduring than India, which, despite an ancient language and culture, created its present form of government and its present shape only during the last fifty years of the twentieth century. The United States has the longest enduring written constitution in the world. The institution of the presidency has remained since George Washington held that position.

Amid this remarkable constancy, how can it be that on the world stage the United States is notorious for change?

Our legislative and judicial systems have certainly evolved over time, but they are clear and direct descendents of the original system set up in the 1700s. Many of the issues that they confront have remained: racism endures, the national defense continues to be a preoccupation, joblessness is, as always, a national fear. Taxes and their avoidance remain a dominant topic of public discourse, and a cause of private resentment. The country's borders have changed little since the Civil War restored the Union and William Seward negotiated the purchase of Alaska, securing for the United States the westernmost reaches of the continent. Even in dress, American style has remained fairly constant—Americans have always worn European business suits and dresses, even if the lapels have widened and narrowed over time.

So what gives the United States its reputation for change?

The thesis of this book is that this reputation for change is a result of different phenomena, ones that are less about government and language,

borders and national defense than our textbooks suggest. These phenomena constitute a historical pattern that has been absent from many history books and our national dialogue—a set of changes that have shaped our country, often without involving political debate. This other history is physical. It is about change in the devices that make people's lives easier, in the amount of space that people have to live in, in how much distance they travel in a day, in how often they move to new houses, in the landscape of the country. It is about change that is not based on beliefs or rights or political ferment.

The laws driving these trends are not written by Congress, but rather are the laws of physics and chemistry and biology that determine how fast people can travel and what they can build and how healthy they can be. One of their common themes has to do with freedom—but not in the classic sense of freedom from government abuses. Today, distances that could long only be traveled in months or years are wiped away in a few hours by an airplane. This has freed people from the constraints of location. Meals that were grown, harvested, cooked, and served with great labor are now obtained with a moment's notice. This has freed people from the farm and from some housework. Today, tasks that required slow, laborious devotion are done quickly by assembly lines or computers. Clothes that were sewn or knitted are, today, bought—and women and men are freed to put their efforts elsewhere, as well as to have more clothes. Political freedom was critical to the origins of the United States, and remains critical. But as time has gone on, new, nonpolitical freedoms have taken center stage.

People's obligations to their families, which once kept them home instead of out exploring the world, have given way as children move out of the house at young ages and often live across the country from their parents. Duty to children, parents, or grandparents can be met sometimes by sending money in an envelope instead of through time spent at home. This partial freedom from family obligations has changed every aspect of our experience. No law passed by Congress can match the fundamental nature of such change; few decisions by an American court can affect people as deeply. The changing connections to the family are among the most important components of an unsung history of the United States.

Our lives are accelerating: the number of miles Americans travel in a day, the number of calculations we expect from our computers in a sec-

ond, the products of our assembly lines, our expectations for what a person accomplishes in a day. The number of people living alone has risen dramatically as well, and changed our relationships with other people, our expectations for privacy, and our responsibilities. Our connections to the places where we live and where we are born are changing, just as our connections to the family are changing, and our connections to tradition, to groups of people, to nature, between rich and poor, and to other parts of the country are all evolving. The number of possessions that we own has grown dramatically over the years as well, possibly to compensate for gaps in our networks of human relationships, or possibly borne of the marriage of acquisitiveness and affluence.

These unheralded trends have slowly ascended to a position of governance in our lives today, overtaking the traditional roles of religious teaching, political discourse, and even family dinners. The country's official history is shaped by 535 senators and members of Congress who work part of the year to write new laws, often according to longstanding traditions—and by small numbers of other individuals. But across the country, more than one hundred million people work every day to make more and better consumer goods and provide services to customers. In Silicon Valley, about half a million people work to double the speed of information every eighteen months.[1] In every state, construction workers bulldoze hillsides for new suburbs and put up hospitals for better health care. Their combined products overwhelm the staples of college history tomes: judicial precedents and electoral formations.

All of these changes, from the building of roads to the burning of fossil fuels to people's choices at the shopping center and the affordability of living alone, have a direct and dramatic effect on the natural environment. Meanwhile, it is often the case that legal precedents and decisions by courts do not take the environment into account; they concentrate instead on property rights, contractual obligations, and economics. Even legislation directed at environmental issues, like the Clean Air Act, may have less effect on nature than the actions of Silicon Valley's use of materials and energy to build computers, or Detroit's use of the same to build cars. When it comes to the environment, the underlying trends recounted here are the primary events.

Environmental problems are chronicled in the media and in books of statistics as polluted air and water, shrinking forests, eroded soil, unstable

climate, and so forth. But many of those changes are the physical manifestations of the speeds at which people travel, their quests for privacy and more living space, their expectations for material possessions, and other aspects of contemporary lifestyle. At their roots, environmental problems are not only pollution or waste but can be seen as the physical manifestation of our desires for mobility, privacy, comfort, disposability of goods, and other common goals.

If we treat environmental issues as distinct from lifestyle choices, we separate our actions from their environmental consequences, and we also let some of the fundamental currents of our history go undiagnosed. We should see these environmental trends as part of the evolution of the goals and priorities emerging from our country's history. We can read today's environmental issues, in part, as the embodiment of our social values, priorities, and doctrines.

The chapters of this book begin to delineate a powerful set of trends that are shaping the United States, that consist of living patterns and shopping sprees more than legislative processes or wars. It is a story of how fast people work and travel, and who they live with. No treaties or laws are discussed, but motels and drive-in movie theaters do receive attention, as do loneliness and isolation. Viewed individually, these things may seem beyond the scope of public affairs. Taken together, however, they can be seen as the basic elements of the story of our times. Yet the relatively small amount of research that has been done on these lifestyle issues mostly resides in obscure parts of government agencies like the Census Bureau and the Transportation Department, sometimes in academia, and occasionally in articles in demographic magazines read by advertising executives. The changes that have swept our personal lives deserve a much larger reception than can be found in the library of the Commerce Department or from the readership of a few journals. They are central to what happens to Americans, to our economy, and to our politics.

The Ascendancy of the Mundane

Today's Americans are among the first people in history to enjoy inexpensive antibiotics and prescription drugs, enticing electronics, and walk-in closets. People's loyalty to, and use of, new comfort-generating products

like pharmaceuticals exists somewhat in proportion to the number of sneezes they have escaped during allergy season and the number of headaches cured by aspirin.

Such concrete innovations shape consciousness, and maybe even usurp part of the passion of public life. They are part of the ascendancy of practical little objects, like over-the-counter pills and walking shoes, that people can pick up with their hands, over principles and beliefs. There are others. Plumbing has saved lives by reducing disease, and has brought warm, daily showers. Better mattresses may help people have a better night's sleep. These are contributions to our well-being that are made by pharmaceutical companies, engineers, and technicians, and they may mean more to most Americans than the contributions made by their elected officials or even by their neighbors and community members. The success of providing some relief from allergies or pain contributes directly to people's comfort and their ability to function. No politicians can boast so much success in addressing their constituents' needs!

America is the most successful country ever at providing comfort and convenience to its people, and many of us are responding by placing our confidence in merchandise. All Americans use the objects made for us by engineers. Meanwhile, less than 5 percent of adult Americans engage in any kind of political activity aside from voting.[2] Since the 1960s, memberships have fallen dramatically in parent–teacher associations; women's organizations such as the League of Women Voters; the Boy Scouts, whose membership is down 26 percent since 1970; the Red Cross, which is down 61 percent since 1970; and the Lions Club, Elks, Shriners, Jaycees, and Masons. (For more data on political disengagement, see Chapter 2.) Meanwhile, the sales of myriad kinds of merchandise are booming.[3]

The greater share of the merchandise for sale in our stores and on our dotcom sites has been developed relatively recently in history, much of it since World War II.[4] People look to the merchandise not only for relief from their headaches, but also for solutions to deeper problems, like loneliness or fear. More self-help books sell every year than books about participatory politics, by far.[5] This is because self-help books claim to address deeper needs than do politics. Car dealers sell mobility and pharmacies sell relief. But politics and moral teachings offer abstractions that many people do not accept as valuable.

People have many choices today. We can buy food, cooked or uncooked, twenty-four hours a day. We can make phone calls from airplanes. We can participate in religious organizations or not, as we choose. But much remains for us to desire. People now seek freedom from boredom, and try to buy that freedom with devices: televisions, stereos, vacations, restaurant dinners. We try to free ourselves from unwanted jobs by using more efficient computers and faster assembly lines. But freedom evades many of those attempts, much like a fast car that gets nowhere when stuck in traffic on the way to work.

The search for new freedoms and goals is the tension of our time. The ability to leave the office. The opportunity to go off by oneself. It is privacy, space, speed, anonymity, and separation from whatever one finds undesirable that we seek in place of justice and liberty. The organizing principles of our time no longer center on political freedom but instead include the pursuit of convenience and comfort and health.

Many people complain that American politics is shallow and manipulated by special interests, and that true goals like justice and integrity are lost in our politics. But this assumes that justice and integrity *are* our true goals, rather than possession of objects and consumption of conveniences. Rather than being met by justice today, many of our goals are being met (i.e., bought) successfully, from medical care to comfortable shoes to machines that save us from hazardous work. It could be that our public discourse is stronger than it seems. Maybe it is a physical dialogue. Automobile advertisements that show a mother and daughter saved from an accident by antilock brakes may speak more directly and loudly to many people today than political advertisements showing candidates who claim to have a strong record on schools. The marketplace hosts an energetic banter, covering topics from safety to opportunity to planning for retirement to quality exercise. This banter holds the attention of many people who do not vote and do not read a newspaper.

In our music and art, the physical and banal daily details are taking hold. Rock songs from R.E.M. to Lou Reed list toy Tonka trucks, alleyways, and bars.[6] Rap music is filled with references to television sitcoms and brand names of clothing. Jerry Seinfeld's show is filled with kitchen gadgets that don't work right, catsup bottles in the diner, antics in the car,

and the details of city life. Andy Warhol was not the last painter to portray household items—indeed, his ideas have invaded the works of other artists as well, an enduring triumph of the mundane.

Today's art and music are addressing the concerns on the minds of many people. They, more than our political dialogues, are reflecting the realities that are evolving in American culture today, such as whether or not we can find a parking space or how short of time we all feel. It is no accident that those parts of our political discourse, like zoning codes or gas prices, that do affect our physical surroundings are also the most contentious. Even discussions of "family values" often fail to include the things that most affect family life—such as how often families move to a new home or new state, or how far they have to drive to get to a good school or a job. In a recent state election in New Jersey, many surveys reported that the most important issue in the campaign was actually the price of automobile insurance. Those organizations that can speak to practical issues and offer the devices needed to deal better with daily pressures will win legislative debates and lead the country.

America could have a lively discussion about these topics. It could update our "national speed" of miles traveled every day in the newspaper alongside the Dow Jones Industrial Index. Our television stations and magazines could account for how many people live alone, and measure it the way they count the "Index of Leading Economic Indicators." Yet many of these changes have gone almost unchronicled. Data on how many miles Americans travel in a day, on average, have never been published. Data on how many people live alone are available only in an unnoticed brief from the Census Bureau. Statistics on how often American families move to new homes and new states are available from a monograph published by the Population Reference Bureau and have gotten only a small amount of attention in the popular press. Surprisingly, even though many people have a sense that ownership of appliances is rising, most data on ownership are owned, and rarely published, by industry associations.

The same could be said for data and information about many other topics that concern what is happening to the American people. This book draws together some of the most important physical and social changes

that are shaping our future, but which have not gotten the attention that they deserve. Taken together, they draw a portrait of an evolving national character.

A New National Character

Alfred North Whitehead once said that people think in abstractions but live in detail.[7] The founding principles of the country are historical abstractions to many people. Americans are living in myriad details of decorated athletic shoes and fancy coffee drinks and kitchen appliances that come in all shapes and sizes. It is for these goals that many Americans work all day. Not to guarantee their right to speak or to worship but rather to secure their ability to drive a nice car or pay for an airplane ride and hotel room while on vacation.

The American dream has long been a home in the suburbs on a little piece of land, with a car in the driveway, and perhaps even a white picket fence. This dream is one of ownership rather than one of political freedom and justice for all. If we believed that freedom were threatened, then maybe we would rise to the occasion with the passion and commitment of our ancestors. But most of us do not believe that freedom or liberty is threatened. When we measure how the country is doing, it is not justice we measure, but gross national product, a quantity of material production and services.

Not all Americans share this unprecedented material abundance. For those of us who don't, the old American ideals may speak loudly. From such affronts as police brutality to illegally low wages and work conditions to toxic waste dumps located in poor communities and urban ghettos, many people may never have felt so strongly the need for the classic trio of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

For other people, though, this moment in history is one of great success. It is the place where the founding beliefs of the country were intended to take us: a place where many Americans live free of poverty and anger, take basic human rights for granted, and have moved on to a concern for enjoying the benefits of those assets. The majority of Americans now alive have always had freedom of expression and freedom of religion, as well as refrigerators and freeways.

There is a danger of a split between the people who are benefiting from this moment in history and those who are not, between rich and poor, or those with opportunities and those without. Increases in the speed of transportation and the power of computers are available only to those who can afford them. Likewise, a country that caters to those who live alone will not provide for those whose families cannot even afford enough space for dignity. The host of possessions that affect the lives of many Americans do not exist in the homes of many other Americans. This disconnection between the people who can take advantage of today's rising speeds and abundances and those people who cannot is the most threatening aspect of our rapidly developing physical history.

In the last thirty years, many commentators have lamented that the United States has not made overwhelming progress in civil rights. But it has expanded living space per person. It has further spread the ownership of such objects as videocassette recorders and cars, but the gap between rich and poor has grown. A look into the differences between the areas in which we have failed and those in which we have succeeded offers a glimpse into the essence of what Americans are really working toward. It may be a glimpse into what Americans really care about. The reason why more progress has been made with possessions and living space than with civil rights is that America is putting more of its energy, work, and sweat toward those commodities than toward building a just and equitable society. We are building new machines more effectively than we are working toward abstract American ideals like equality and justice.

What if the workforce that gets up every morning and goes to work in San Jose, California, to build Internet search engines and Web site animation software could be redirected toward building equal rights and equal opportunities for all people? What if the energy and funding behind the U.S. military were behind environmental restoration or education for inner-city children or immunizations for those who lack them?

These questions are naive. The energy and work put toward marketable products cannot be redirected toward goals that must come instead from public discourse and a sense of common purpose. Work makes products. But a stronger, more cohesive society comes from shared values, not assembly lines.

But it is even more than that. Our successes at material comfort anes-

thetize us from the symptoms of public failure. When we shift our efforts toward the production of physical objects instead of toward responsibility for other people, then we focus less on those other people, and we insulate ourselves from their problems. When we replace the values that we share with other people by substituting for them with new merchandise, then we take away from our interest in assuring the well-being of our neighbors. As we succeed in surrounding ourselves with the objects of success we separate ourselves from the people who are not succeeding.

To many in the middle and upper classes, the people who dominate in the economy, the threats of the day are cholesterol and heart disease, car accidents, and drops in the value of their mutual funds. For them, the imperatives of the moment include health care, memberships to the health club, air bags, and financial advice. These imperatives become focal issues in our economy, and increasingly our economy is driving our culture. Our culture is coming to be defined more by economics than by values or politics.

Among economists, the word "values" does not even refer to principles or doctrines. It means prices—amounts of money that can purchase speedy travel, possessions, space to live in, and separation from bad smells and unpleasant tasks. The economists' definition of value is heard more and more, from the radio waves to private conversations. Economics holds a larger share of our public space than politics does, and more than culture does. It utilizes the advertising media, billboards, television, junk mail, new lingo in shops, and Internet banners. It shapes much of our culture, from decisions of what music to produce and market to decisions of which fashions to sell. It even shapes much of our politics, where economic growth is the supreme goal. Economics is ascendant. It fills the streets with cars and homes with furniture. Value means purchasing power.

With inexpensive prices as a guiding principle, speed becomes a new version of freedom, and cars and airplanes proliferate along with it; privacy becomes the new liberty, along with its larger homes; possession of plentiful devices designed to give us comfort and ease is the new American dream; and separation from toil, responsibility, and dirt becomes the new goal. The pursuit of such goals, dreams, and freedoms paves roads, strings telephone lines, creates housing developments, and alters the envi-

ronment in myriad ways. They are the physical manifestations of the marketplace's new "values," and they represent direct change in nature as much as they represent each American.

They are also the activities that are shaping our personalities. We can see their results directly when we look at environmental change, but the values that lie underneath environmental degradation are at work on more than nature. They are at work on ourselves and on all aspects of the country. We can witness them in smog, climate change, poor drinking water, and the extinction of species. But we live them in urgency and fear and pressure. We can also witness these values in the fact that we have worked hard to restore many rivers, replanted some forests, built hospitals, and made many improvements in our surroundings. We live those benefits as well, with healthier bodies and educated children. All of these traits are the physical manifestations of our new national personality.

The New Manifest Destiny

In 1845, the editor of the *New York Morning News,* John L. O'Sullivan, wrote that it is the "manifest destiny of this nation to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." When the United States did finally encompass its present contiguous area, some 30 years later, the growth ended 300 years of Spanish-Mexican control of many regions, eliminated control of some areas by France and Russia, and resulted in one of the largest countries in the world.[8] But these geographical achievements did not end the former colonists' drive.

Having reached California and purchased Alaska, the United States had taken the area between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans by the second half of the nineteenth century. What goals would Americans turn their sights toward next? Physical expansion no longer had the same imperative it once had, since the country already stretched over many of the richest areas of the continent. Hawaii was still to be acquired, along with Puerto Rico, Guam, and other "possessions." But claims against Canada or Mexico were hardly a national obsession the way they had been once.

Americans could have been content. We could have continued to live on farms and ranches, to have large families to provide many hands to