

Book reviews

What are we reading?

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As we stated in the last issue of HSM we will review in these columns recent books that have come to our attention. Readers can easily contribute to this dialogue by sending us a few lines on each book that they have read specifying clearly (a) The name of the book (b) The name of the author (c) The name of the publisher (d) The location of the publisher (e) The number of pages in the book (f) The price if available (g) The ISBN Number. Send the reviews to John P. van Gigch, at vang@sonic.net.

I was very stimulated to read Karl Wolf's commentary in HSM (Vol. 24, Number 1, 2005) about Charles François's Second Edition of *International Encyclopedia of Systems and Cybernetics* (K.G. Saur Publishers, Munich, 2 volumes. 741 pp., Euro 350, 2004). I reviewed this work for *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* (Vol. 22(3): 273–276, May–June 2005) and concur in Wolf's assessment. It is a very big contribution to the systems literature which should be considered by all libraries and by every serious systemicist or cybernetician.

I encourage our readers to find a copy and study this work carefully and in detail.

As to Karl Wolf's comments I thought that they were relevant and provide an independent view of François's text. My assessment is biased in that I consider myself a close friend and colleague of the author when we both lived in 1980's in Argentina. I was interested in Wolf's comments about how the Encyclopedia could be used. As he stated it is really a "hybrid of encyclopedia-dictionary-glossary-handbook – reference-source book and even a thesaurus".

Today I also want to comment on a bibliography of Norbert Wiener. It is entitled: *Dark Hero of the Information Age: In Search of Norbert Wiener The Father of Cybernetics* by Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman, Basic Books, New York, 2005, 424 pp., Price \$27.50 US, ISBN 0-7382-0368-8.

It is a book that took many years in the making and it contains a detailed history of the systems movement in the last decades. As this book reveals, Wiener had an eventful life. Wiener was an important personality and cybernetician. As we all know, he invented the field and the name of the field of Cybernetics. His life is intertwined with that of other famous scientists of his generation such as McCulloch, Von Neumann, Stafford Beer, Margaret Mead, Turing to name a few. When *The New York Review of Books* devotes a review to a book it is because they consider the author of importance to the general public. And indeed they reviewed this book in *New York Review of Books* (*The Tragic Tale of A Genius* by Freeman Dyson, Vol. LII (12), July 14, 2005, pp. 10–13). There is little that we can add to this thorough review except to recommend that our readers read the book. Norbert Wiener was controversial in his private life as well as his scientific career. He remains a stellar figure among the scientists who started System Science and Cybernetics, of course. There is still much to learn from this account of his achievements as well as his failures and disappointments. As the cover of the text points out: "Conway and Siegelman set out to explore the many ways in which his revolutionary ideas continue to shape our lives". The authors also state that "what Norbert Wiener invented has only grown in significance". He popularized the notion of feedback and was a precursor for what we call nowadays "smart" technology and the Information Age. He warned us of the dangers inherent in new electronic and biological technologies that could exceed human control. "The story of this brilliant, multitalented man is fundamental to an understanding of the intersection of technology and culture in the twenty-first century". We agree.

Finally, for this issue of HSM, I would like to bring to the attention of readers books by Michael Ruse. Each of us have an opinion of the Evolution-Creationism controversy. It pits those of us who believe Darwin's theory is still the best scientific explanation of the beginning of the world as we know it, and the so-called creationists who adhere to a biblical

interpretation which cannot be proven scientifically. It is true that one can believe in Darwinian theory and at the same time believe in the existence of Supreme Being – as many reputable scientists do. Regardless of ones' beliefs the controversy rages on and is discussed daily in the US media. At issue here is whether Creationism and its latest invention Intelligent Design should be taught along side Evolution in primary and secondary schools. As a reporter commented recently is not so much that Americans believe in Creationism – although a great number of them do – it is that “they also react positively to the fairness and equal-time argument” which pretends to place those two versions on an equal footing. Even President Bush recently made this point. It is not a scientific reason but one tinged in political, cultural and even religious overtones. To understand the issues involved and be up-to-date on this controversy, I recommend Michael Ruse's books on the subject. He brings an impassionate view to the subject in several books. I will name only his very last although he has written several on the same or related subject. Refer to: Michael Ruse, *The Evolution-Creation Struggle*, Harvard Univ. Press, 2005, Harvard, ISBN 0-674-01687-4, \$25.95, 328 pp.

Why do I insist in recommending books on this subject, you may well ask. The reason is simple. As a sci-

entist I am puzzled when scientists cannot dispel the doubt that exist about the Theory of Evolution. Creationists deride Darwin's theory by saying: “*Oh ! It is only a theory*”, and they add: “*Show us that Evolution is a fact*”.

Darwin and innumerable scientists after him have proven that the Theory of Natural Selection explains the beginning of the living species on this earth *scientifically*. Just today scientists have decoded the DNA and genes of chimpanzees – our human precursors – to bolster the fact that they are more than a million years old. So much for the claim that Evolution is *just a theory* and that the world as we know it, is only 10 000 years old! Intelligent Design is not even a theory: it is in the realm of revelations and miracles. It cannot withstand scientific scrutiny.

As to the statement that “The Theory of Evolution is not ‘a fact’”, I cannot refute because I cannot find a satisfactory definition of ‘a fact’. May be our readers will provide me with one. I would entertain a discussion with our readers on the points raised by this review.

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