

Books

The world is not an immovable object

The Tipping Point – How little things can make a big difference
by Malcolm Gladwell

Abacus, London, 2001
£7.99

MOVEMENTS FOR REFORM seldom achieve their aims at the rate or to the degree looked for by their supporters. Yet, at the same time, some ideas, fashions and behaviours take hold and spread like epidemics.

Malcolm Gladwell's book provides a unique understanding of how the world changes. Those who would change the world should read it to gain intelligence about, and insight into, how they might better go about their business.

The author says that, in the context of reform, the term epidemic is more than just a figure of speech. Ideas can act just like viruses that lead to epidemics, he argues. So if we understand how natural epidemics come about – how they start, how they spread and how they take effect – then it may be easier to understand how to make our ideas fill the world.

The author observes that the spread of epidemics is never linear and gradual. Epidemics, whether natural or social, take hold suddenly. There is "one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once" – The Tipping Point.

However, Gladwell asks us to acknowledge that at heart we are all gradualists. "Our expectations," he says, "are set by the steady passage of time." But life is not really like that, he argues. "The world of the Tipping Point is a place where the unexpected becomes expected, where radical change is more than possibility. It is, contrary to all our expectations, a certainty."

The book shows us why "some ideas, behaviours or products start epidemics and others don't". But its practical purpose is to help those in the field to recognise what might be a Tipping Point, and determine just what might be the means of tipping it. These are, he says, the reformer's two keys to success.

The book is packed with interesting and humorous stories and case studies to back the author's thesis – he looks at the children's TV programme *Sesame Street* as an educational virus, the rise and fall of crime in New York, how Hush Puppies became an alternative fashion, Micronesian

youth suicide, and the search for an effective solution to the consequences of teenage smoking.

The author argues that for the reformer to be successful it is essential "to appreciate the power of epidemics", and therefore necessary "to abandon [the] expectation of proportionality". On that point he asks the reader to imagine how far a piece of paper would reach if it were folded 50 times? He asks the reader is the answer as high as a phone book, or perhaps as high as a refrigerator? The answer, actually, is – as far as the sun! Proportionality, Gladwell shows us, is an illusion and "we need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that sometimes big changes follow from small events, and that sometimes these changes can happen very quickly".

The author tells us that while "we all want to believe that the key to making an impact on someone lies with the inherent quality of the ideas we present", this is not the case and is not borne out by the evidence. There is, he argues, "a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it," reminding us that "human communication has its own set of very unusual and counterintuitive rules".

"In the end," Gladwell says "Tipping Points are a reaffirmation of the potential for change and the power of intelligent action. Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push – in just the right place – it can be tipped."

Peter Gibb

To catch a quiet thief

Silent Theft
by David Bollier

Routledge Inc, 2002,
£14.55

JOURNALIST AND GREEN campaigner George Monbiot has spoken (L&L Summer 2002) of the need to revive thinking about the commons – those resources (anything from radio waves to coal) which nobody has manufactured themselves. He wanted to distinguish situations where access to these resources is open to all, from systems of private, joint or common ownership.

Confusion on the matter has enabled what David Bollier calls a "silent theft". By declaring common resources to be un-owned, private companies have claimed



exclusive access to public lands and resources. Under the US Mining Act of 1872, for example, mining companies can buy federal land for only \$2.50 to \$5 an acre, and make enormous royalty-free profits. Under the Act, the US Government has given away more than \$245 billion of mineral reserves.

This is permitted, says Bollier, for two reasons. Firstly, American culture is so heavily predicated on individual ownership that it fails to "see the commons" and value them accordingly. Secondly, the corporate interests doing so well out of this arrangement are powerfully mobilised to block attempts to end the scandal. Mining interests donated \$40m to US politicians between 1993 and 1998, ensuring their right to plunder remains intact.

Silent Theft addresses both of these factors head-on. The book is an impassioned and stimulating call to re-examine our common assets, and a searing indictment of the greed driving contemporary enclosure. While focusing on the US, this lucid book is an important contribution to the wider revival