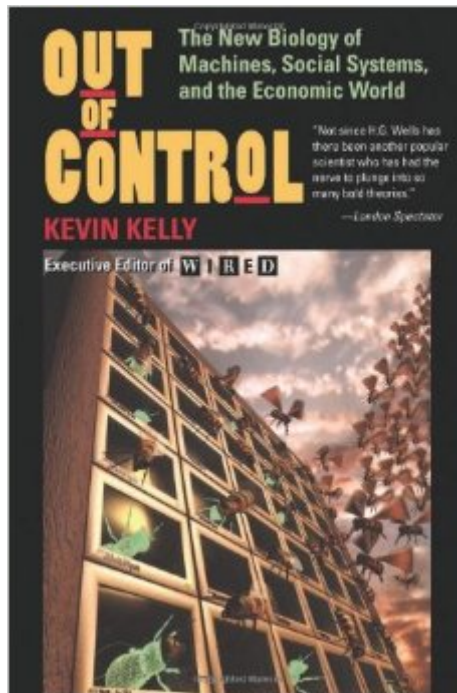


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Out Of Control: The New Biology Of Machines, Social Systems, & The Economic World



Synopsis

Out of Control chronicles the dawn of a new era in which the machines and systems that drive our economy are so complex and autonomous as to be indistinguishable from living things.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When a swarm of bees searches for a new home, it behaves like a single superorganism. Expendable scouts explore potential hive sites concurrently, dancing to communicate their suitability, until, abruptly, the entire swarm flocks into its new home. The locus of decision is a "hive mind," a dispersed, shifting collection of instincts and tiny decisions that somehow transcends the actions of any individual, even the hive queen. Ant colonies behave similarly - and so do foreign currency fluctuations, the folding proteins that regulate the internal processes of life, and the predator-prey struggles that shape global ecosystems. The hive mind is a powerful new metaphor. It's not that scientists failed to notice bee hives and ant colonies before. The difference is that novel scientific tools - chaos theory, for example, and massively parallel computers - have allowed researchers to study and perhaps harness the unpredictable worlds of highly complex, self-organizing systems such as the hive mind. In "Out of Control," Kevin Kelly examines the impact of the hive-mind model as it spreads into the scientific and technological communities. Scientists, he says, are beginning to explore more "holistic" problems, in which entire environments are their laboratory, with huge numbers of interacting factors. Steve Packard, for example, hoped to re-create a prairie ecology in suburban Chicago, an experiment that succeeded over nearly a decade of false starts. He discovered that the order in which he introduced complementary species - grasses and

the insects that disperse their seeds - or the timing of a clearing fire in the aftermath of a drought could radically alter the final shape of his reconstituted prairies.

Why are the three most powerful forces in our world--evolution, democracy and capitalism--so controversial? Hundreds (in the case of democracy, thousands) of years after they were first understood, we still can't quite believe these three phenomena work. Socialist Europe resists capitalism, the religious right in America questions evolution and the Middle East makes a mockery of democracy. When you think about it, it's easy to understand why: all three are radically counterintuitive. "One person, one vote?" What if they vote wrong? But that's the problem--we're thinking about it. Our brains aren't wired to understand the wisdom of the crowd. Evolution, democracy and capitalism don't work at the anecdotal level of personal experience, the level at which our story-driven synapses are built to engage. Instead, they're statistical, operating in the realm of collective probability. They're not right--they're "righter". They're not predictable and controllable--they're inherently out of control. That's scary and unsettling, but also hugely important to understand in a world of increasing complexity and diminishing institutional power (mainstream media: meet blogs; military: meet insurgency). Fortunately, this book that makes sense of all of this. Out of Control was first published in 1994, well before its time, but it's one of those rare books that sells better each year it gets older. That's because Kelly recognized that the messy markets of natural selection, enlightened self-interest and invisible hands all anticipated the Internet and the delights of watching peer-to-peer cacophony create the greatest oracle the world has ever seen.

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