Review of *Too Smart for Our Own Good*, by Harold Welch, January 2011

The title is misleading. The book is actually an extensive, not to say exhaustive, history of human social systems starting with the first primates and ending today. The section on early hunter-gatherer societies I found fascinating, but that might be just my own personal interest. I marked up a lot of the book but there were considerable sections I passed over almost completely.

The author uses this book to explore and promote his theory of the *vicious circle principle* (VCP), where population pressure results in technological innovation (from stone tools to fossil fuels to nuclear power). Technological innovation in turn provides more food (the earlier improvements were in fact mostly related directly to food production), which in turn allowed further population growth. And so the VCP continued. Surpluses (of which there were none in stone age societies) led to trade, money, and eventually capitalism. By this time Dilworth becomes a bit rabid, castigating capitalism in general but in the context of inevitability within the VCP.

Dilworth does not offer specific remedies that would allow us to slacken the turning of the vicious circle. However, he does such a superb job marshaling all the evidence documenting the continuing cycle (and drawing together an enormous literature at the same time) that the reader would have to be blind and dumb not to clearly understand the forces at work right up to the present day. In general, Dilworth makes it clear that throughout history, population control has been integral to functioning societies, and he goes to a lot of effort to document that. He shows how we have ignored that history in the past 200 years, to the point where population is hardly mentioned, despite its being the basic cause of everything going wrong. Obviously he thinks that any efforts to curtail population growth (and by extension immigration) would be good, although he doesn’t presume to offer specific remedies. I can’t blame him for this. I have thought a good deal about specific remedies, but they are only several amongst many, and there has to be a lot of collective thought put into this. For example, Dilworth doesn’t like nuclear, but any logical analysis tells us that if we want any kind of tolerable transition to post-oil, nuclear has to play a big part. If we don’t do nukes, then more coal will come out of the ground, to our even greater detriment.

This is an excellent, scholarly work. Cherry pick and you’ll get the gist, although spending a few days on the book would be somewhat more rewarding (but the law of diminishing returns ...). One cannot be optimistic after reading this.