

Reflections on progress

Technology is as old as man's need to fight nature and improve his condition. When nature is concerned, it doesn't care one bit about man's existence - and can in fact be quite hostile to it. It can be quite hostile to all living organisms of course and living organisms respond by evolving. Man evolved also, but at some point in his evolution he started using tools to help increase his odds. Whenever that happened, technology was born. The birth of it has improved our living conditions dramatically - and there's no going back. Nor would we want to go back fully: we would have to stop being what we are and become something else - creatures at nature's mercy.

Why does man build the machines that he builds? I think it depends on the kind of society that man inhabits. Large empires may focus on weapons of killing, take the Soviet Union as an example; consumer societies may focus on consumption, think the United States. Progress isn't a thing in itself - the technology we get depends on who makes decisions, on how things are funded, on how research is organized, on how inventions are commercialized.

Whatever the future of a data-driven society may be then, it will likely reflect our current systems. There is a reason why we have Facebook and aren't yet on Mars or why climate change is still a problem. If a lot of our technology is created by profit-seeking actors that are funded by capital markets, we are more likely to get certain kinds of technology than others. The relationship, of course, isn't fully deterministic - one could try to convince the markets to fund an invention by telling them that it will *eventually* turn out to be profitable. In any event, the past may not be a bad predictor of the future: if we keep inventing things with the systems we have, we'll keep, by and large, getting the kinds of things we've been getting. Which means: more ways of getting people to watch ads (with funding from the capital markets), more ways of killing (with funding from the markets and various governments), and fewer flights to Mars.

People like to dream of returning to Heidegger's Black Forest farmhouse - and some of them might do it. But all cannot do it: we like what technology gives us and we are not going to give it up. Those Luddites may have been onto something. But we are not going to destroy our machines even if we suspect that they may eventually destroy us - we will keep inventing new ones. The only way is forward - but one would do very well to think long and hard within which structures and sets of values we are doing it within. Man is a complicated being and that won't change anytime soon. But what can - and should - change are the very concrete ways in which technology comes into our lives: for example, the systems of governance, research, and funding that decide what gets built and what does not.

All of which is to say: technology is as old as man's need to confront nature. It's not going away. The technology we created is a reflection of the kind of process we've built for creating it. So far, the results of this process have been decidedly mixed, and if we continue this way, they may end up destroying us. We should do a lot better. Let's at least talk about how to do that.

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