The Shock of the Old, by David Edgerton

The past in the saddle

David Goldblatt • Friday 26 January 2007 01:00 GMT • 0 Comments

Despite all evidence to the contrary, the Western world continues to believe the future will be bright, shiny and technologically advanced. In both public and scholarly accounts of technological development and its consequences, we remain in thrall to the science-fiction visionaries of early 20th-century futurism. Novelty, innovation and invention will benignly shape our world, though it does look like we are going to pass on the silver one-piece jumpsuits.

Against this relentless, hubristic and uncritical celebration of the new, reading The Shock of the Old is a quiet pleasure and a salutary corrective. David Edgerton's book about "technology and global history since 1900" argues rightly that our accounts of 20th-century technology are fundamentally unbalanced, focusing on invention over use, acquisition over maintenance, and inevitability over choice. In quick succession, all of these notions, and the crude historical models generated from them, are entertainingly and empirically dismantled.

我们对20世纪技术的描述跟不上是不平衡的 把重点放在发明而不是使用 获取而不是维护 必然性而不是选择上

Consider the horse, the most important form of land-based transport and agricultural power for humanity for much of the last few millennia. With the arrival of the train and the invention of the internal combustion engine, the age of motorisation had arrived and the horse, metaphorically and literally, was heading for the knacker's yard. Yet for the first half of the 20th-century, its utility and numbers increased on farms and as urban transport.

Although the two world wars were billed as industrial, scientific affairs, the British Army started the first with just 25,000 horses and finished it with over half a million, not to mention 47,000 camels. In the Second World War, that leading purveyor of motorised blitzkrieg, the Wehrmacht, had 1.2m. nags on their books. The arrival and passing of peak oil suggests we might be re-encountering the horse all over again.

Simply put, to hail the invention of a technology as the key moment in explaining its significance is a grotesque distortion of what happens on the ground. Technologies arrive, disappear, make comebacks and get reinvented. Is online shopping that much of a leap from the mail order catalogue? The condom, consigned to the dustbin of reproductive technologies by the contraceptive pill in the 1960s, made a major comeback after the arrival of HIV.

What really counts is not when and how a technology is invented, but how it is

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appearing and imposing themselves. Adopting this model of historical change allows Edgerton to demolish a whole host of techno-nonsense; for instance, that innovation is the key determinant of rapid economic growth; that the spread of new technologies of communication and transportation will serve as instruments of global peace and harmony.

It also takes him into the more unglamorous but vitally important areas of technological development; for example, the capacity of modern societies to slaughter animals and their human enemies in large numbers. As ever, new does not necessarily mean better. The Rwandan genocide was conducted primarily with the machete.

Edgerton leaves us with an infinitely more nuanced, balanced and perceptive account of technology and social change than conventional accounts would allow. He gets out of the laboratory and into the real world, the domestic world and the developing world. He champions the inventiveness of those who can repair and adapt old stuff rather than just making new stuff. And he insists that we have a choice about the kinds of machines that we make and use.

In a world where billions are squandered on high-end research but no one can make a CD that doesn't scratch or a toaster that can be economically repaired, where economic values make complete face transplants possible but cannot make drugs to tackle the developing world's infectious diseases, a little more reasoned choice and a little less futuristic babble would be no bad thing. David Edgerton has thankfully delivered both.

David Goldblatt's global history of football, 'The Ball is Round', is published by Viking