

“Does Improved Technology Mean Progress?”

Leo Marx joins the conversation speculating about the relationship between societal/social progress and technological progress. He describes the history of technological development in the United States and he challenges the idea that technology is correlated to progress of any kind. The answer to whether or not technological progress is good can never be found unless one asks, “good for whom?”.

Marx gives a historical account of the rise of technology in the developing United States and attempts to illustrate the co-constitutive nature of technology and society. In this process, he also illustrates the inseparability of technology and social/civil/justice issues.

The early American Enlightenment thinkers believed technological progress to be directly linked to social liberation. Benjamin Franklin was a key player in this liberation quest. Marx describes Franklin as someone who “[belonged] to that heroic revolutionary phase in the history of the bourgeoisie when that class saw itself as the vanguard of humanity and its principles as universal.”

As Americans abandoned Enlightenment ideals, they embraced the concept of Manifest Destiny, and demonstrated a surging (western/masculine) desire to conquer nature and all of the the indigenous people found in nature.

In everything above, Marx is (accidentally, I presume) pointing out the inherent hypocrisy of believing that *any one measure* can be used to signify social progress. A country powered by slave labor embraced the Enlightenment and the power of technology for social liberation (liberation for whom?). With historical insight, it’s clear that the majority of Enlightenment thinkers were racist, colonialist capitalists content with the ethical and cognitive dissonance of both positions; there was no consideration of using technology to “liberate” the slaves, the women, the immigrants, or anyone other than the (white) men in power. Additionally, Franklin, held up as the apogee of good, hard work, was a slave rapist. Whom did Franklin benefit?

Similarly, Manifest Destiny and colonialism’s impact on indigenous populations in North America is well-documented. The “technological sublime” was clearly only sublime for the colonizers and no benefit can be found - even today - for the indigenous tribes that were destroyed by this “progress.” (sublime destiny for whom?)

Marx ends with questions designed to challenge technological determinists to think about the nature of their innovation, but his questions don’t include issues of justice, equity, safety or sustainability. While I agree with his conclusion: “in the absence of answers [...], technological improvements may very well turn out to be incompatible with genuine, that is to say social, progress,” we need to be asking better questions that account for the varieties of “progress” experienced by all parties in techno/social interactions.