

IN FOCUS

Our Daily Metaphysics

Samuel C. Florman: *Blaming Technology: The Irrational Search for Scapegoats*; St. Martins Press; New York.

by Robert A. Rogowsky

"The blaming of technology," Samuel Florman writes, "starts with the making of myths—most importantly, the myth of the technological imperative and the myth of the technocratic elite. In spite of the injunctions of common sense, and contrary to the evidence at hand, the myths flourish." *Blaming Technology* is a valiant, though perhaps quixotic, attempt to inject common sense into a variety of issues that, loosely connected, constitute the public debate about technology. The windmills of fear constructed by latter-day Luddites are so prominent and so pervasive that a voice of reason may appear peculiar, almost amusingly out of touch.

Technological progress, like any change in society, imposes costs. As far back as colonial times, for instance, smallpox infection was a threat from the very vaccination intended to prevent the disease. There are the less obvious costs, too: fear of being replaced; fear of alienation in a mechanized world; fear of continually losing ground in a world of exploding knowledge; fear of losing control of one's life in a world where knowledge means control. All very real

Dr. Rogowsky is an economist with the Federal Trade Commission.

fears. But they are often based on ignorance and misunderstanding; that is, they may be irrational or misplaced. Technology is a convenient target for our fears and frustrations about developments that we as individuals cannot control—and sometimes can hardly understand. In the process of cognitive dissonance, technological innovation becomes a convenient scapegoat.

With a wealth of facts and figures to back his argument, Mr. Florman systematically attacks the myths and the fears, putting both into perspective. The so-called "technocracy" of engineers and other "technocrats," for instance, he exposes as a fantasy. Power in industry and government rests not with technocrats, but with lawyers and accountants. Less than 1% of the professionals on Capitol Hill are engineers. The much-maligned Corps of Engineers is not a military juggernaut bent on destroying the environment, but simply a civil-engineering agency through which Congress studies, evaluates, and executes public-works projects. Though it may be overzealous, it is directed and controlled by the purse strings of the Public Works Committees of Congress.

The nuclear angst is also put into perspective. A study commissioned by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission estimated that the chance of an individual dying from nuclear accident in any one year is 5 billion to one; from lightning the odds are 2 million to one. In contrast, 150 coal miners die each year from

accidents. Standing for 24 hours a day for one year on the edge of a nuclear plant site would expose a person to one-fourth of the millirems of radiation of a single dental X-ray; one four-hundredth of the millirems of a single gastrointestinal-tract X-ray. Statistically, the odds of being injured while driving around a plant site are vastly higher than a radioactivity-related injury at a nuclear facility. But the angst lies with the latter.

Despite the author's cogent response to the many myths that enter the technology debate, the reader is left wondering precisely why this irrational fear of technology is so pervasive and persistent. Antitechnology, as Mr. Florman shows, is part of the liberal agenda, a propagandist's paradise, a target for pacifists, conservationists, consumer advocates, unions, feminists, and the small-is-good crowd. Combined with the influence of the liberal media, there is a formidable force arrayed against

technological progress. Perhaps liberals fear that in a technological society, power will swing to the controllers of technology. Such a notion has little basis in history, of course, but the liberal argument does not require reason or experience. The rapid progress of technology increases uncertainty about the future. Uncertainty creates anxiety and anxiety is not a logical experience. It is an emotional one.

Michael Novak offered a rather frightening insight in a recent issue of *National Review*, (August 6, 1982) on the dovish position of many American Catholic bishops. Novak sees their opposition to nuclear arms as "a spiritual conversion, not a logical experience." Perhaps many liberals' opposition to technological progress has the same basis—it is an act of faith. And as such, it is by definition impervious to reason. Florman's exercise in logic will undoubtedly have no influence on such "converts." We can only wait hopefully for them to deconvert.

Hesse Out of Haight-Ashbury

Hermann Hesse: *Pictor's Metamorphoses*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

What's wrong with talking chairs and grumbling stoves? Samuel Taylor Coleridge defended the fanciful elements in his works, claiming that the poet has the privilege of employing things supernatural to convey a message or evoke a sentiment from the reader. Hermann Hesse is certainly entitled to the same apology. *Pictor's Metamorphoses*, an array of fanciful tales—some written by Hesse as a child—is as entertaining as it is instructive. Fantasy here is a backdrop for larger lessons; the magical setting gives a moral dimension to Hesse's heroes. In

"Pictor's Metamorphoses," a magical stone entices Pictor into making a wish which he comes to lament. His wish, to become a tree, results in his isolation from nature and the natural transformations which go on around him—a state which Coleridge called life-in-death. A young maiden, however, falls in love with Pictor and, wishing to become one with him, is transformed into a lovely bough, an extension of Pictor. The two, now one, emerge from life-in-death and re-enter the natural order.

Although he probes a range of human situations and sentiments—from brotherly love to the frustration of the artist—Hesse strives to make his lessons

universal, examines archetypal tendencies and patterns in generations of storytelling, and re-

establishes the forgotten truth that goodness and justice are timeless. (JM) □

WASTE OF MONEY

Awfully Unlike Austen

Joan Juliet Buck: *The Only Place to Be*; Random House; New York.

When great writers die, some arrangement ought to be made permitting them to take their names with them. Left behind, they are often shamelessly abused by publishers eager to promote second-rate authors with incredibly unwarranted comparisons whose falsity can never be justly denounced by the maligned departed. In the case of *The Only Place to Be*, the genius traduced is Jane Austen, imputed by the dustcover to have been "reincarnated" in the person of Joan Juliet Buck. Austen will come back as a cow first. Imagine Austen, whose novels brilliantly explore the nuances of conversations, manners, and values of cultured British gentility, creating a work depicting churlish movie stars, journalists, and gangsters whose mouths are filled with profanity, whose hearts ache alternately with petty vanity, lust, and ennuï and whose nights (and days) are spent in perverse sex.

Ms. Buck does command a modicum of writing skill, even a measure of wit and perceptiveness, but what she utterly lacks is precisely that which makes Austen's art immortal: meaningful ethical vision. Whereas Austen measures the proud stupidity of a Collins or the calculating unscrupulousness of a Wickham against a finely graded standard of normalcy and

morality, Buck's portrayal of the emptiness of the lives led by *all* of her main characters seems animated by little more than skeptical cynicism. Her protagon-

ist concludes at age seven that eating, like all other human activities, is merely a pointless exercise in redundancy, and the course of life and thought that Ms. Buck allows her never seriously challenges that pessimistic view. Those who hold radically different outlooks, those with religious convictions or bourgeois morals, appear only as caricatures. *Were* Austen alive today, one suspects that she would tell Ms. Buck what one minor character tells her protagonist: "You know, you're intelligent, but I don't think it will help you." (BC) □

Clergy and Laity Concerned, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom—they all were guests of the Rockefeller Family Fund, which was the main sponsor of the meeting. The chief objective of that assembly was to articulate warnings about nuclear-arms control and to promote peace issues. That those warnings sounded just like TASS's warnings on the same subject apparently bothered neither the distinguished financiers nor Mr. Harris. Would you buy an objective (?) poll on those issues from that gentleman?

LIBERAL CULTURE

Would You Buy an Objective Poll from That Man?

Strict objectivity is to the pollsters what virginity was to the knight-errant: to both of them they are their pride and their armor. The latter couldn't fight for an ideal without the purity of say, heart, the former without the same quality of his data. Thus, editorializing is to the pollster the same as carnal temptation was to Sir Lancelot. Yet, speaking at the Church Center in New York City to a peculiar congregation dedicated to boosting a nuclear freeze, this was what Mr. Louis Harris, the crusading pollster, had to say:

Something dramatic and highly important has happened to public opinion in America just over the past year. An urgent, dedicated hunger for peace in a nuclear era has literally overtaken our people. The deep desire

for peace has always been there. The urgency is occasioned by the dread realization that humanity could well be wiped out by a nuclear war, not just at some vague point in the future, but at any time. And anytime could be now.

If that's not editorializing, and with a distinctly liberal/left verbiage to boot, we do not know what is. *Village Voice*, the organ of neo-Bolshevism, reported that Mr. Harris had "enthusiastic listeners." Who were they? A specific coalition of disarmament groups. What groups? Why, these were people who run, or endow with money, outfits like the Institute for Policy Studies, The National Lawyers Guild, the Stern Fund, the Rubin Foundation, *Counter Spy* newsletter, Stewart Mott's Fund for Peace, assorted communist front groups, the Brothers Berigan Ploughshares Fund,

Stalking the Big O

For years, some women have been trying to find a sure-fire approach for achieving what is euphemistically termed "making the earth move." Various approaches, from the Sadean to the more common garden variety, have been and are being attempted. An enterprising group



is searching for such women through the classified section of (where else?) *Village Voice*. The ad claims that through mere "participation in paper & pencil University research [*sic*]," the end of the rainbow can be reached. The paper and pencils concern us. The circumstance that *WV*, the organ of muckraking sensualists, is the messenger of this happy news makes the announcement as valuable as the same paper's support for New York politicians. □