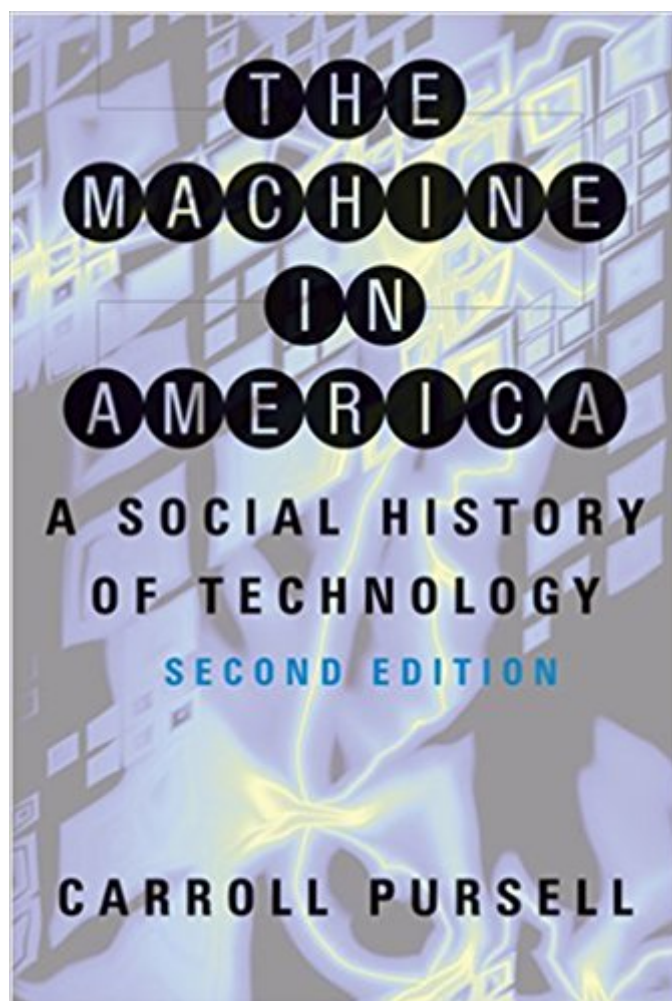


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# The Machine In America: A Social History Of Technology



## Synopsis

From the medieval farm implements used by the first colonists to the invisible links of the Internet, the history of technology in America is a history of society as well. Arguing that "the tools and processes we use are a part of our lives, not simply instruments of our purpose," historian Carroll Pursell analyzes technology's impact on the lives of women and men, on their work, politics, and social relationships—and how, in turn, people influence technological development. Pursell shows how both the idea of progress and the mechanical means to harness the forces of nature developed and changed as they were brought from the Old World to the New. He describes the ways in which American industrial and agricultural technology began to take on a distinctive shape as it adapted and extended the technical base of the industrial revolution. He discusses the innovation of an American system of manufactures and the mechanization of agriculture; new systems of mining, lumbering, and farming, which helped conquer and define the West; and the technologies that shaped the rise of cities. In the second edition of *The Machine in America*, Pursell brings this classic history up to date with a revised chapter on war technology and new discussions on information technology, globalization, and the environment.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The Machine in America's modest preface fails to acknowledge the magnitude of the task undertaken by Carroll Pursell... This book succeeds in achieving Pursell's goals." (Robert Martello Isis)"Certainly one of the best introductions to the history of American technology... Highly

recommended." (Choice)"What differentiates this book and makes it especially appealing is its coverage of agricultural and environmental topics. These subjects are often overlooked by historians of technology, and Pursell's inclusion of them represents an important step toward integrating these fields." (Nicholas Buchanan *Agricultural History*)" The Machine in America has been enduring for multiple reasons, including its solid prose, excellent illustrations and captions, use of current themes (gender, race, class), focus on how society constructs technology, and a critical view of technology as something that historically has been used in America, all too often, to reinforce the powerful rather than help the weak." (Industrial Archaeology)

"It would be hard to find a better introduction to the history of American technologyâ•or, for that matter, to American history itself." (American Heritage of Invention and Technology)"A balanced and clearly written account of the development of American manufacturing and engineering from the colonial period to the present." (American Studies International)

Pursell's acknowledged primary debt to Leo Marx (*The Machine in the Garden*) says a lot about his perspective in this nicely paced, often fascinating work of U.S. social history. Perhaps the best way to encapsulate the book is cite Pursell's citation of two quotes: one at the beginning of the book, the other at the end. In the beginning, Pursell cites another historian (whose name escapes me) who noted the period of European Discovery could be explained in terms of this dynamic of exploration: "the pretext was religion, the motive was gold." From this Pursell's view of technology can be extrapolated as well: the pretext is efficiency, but the motive is hegemony. At the end of the work, he cites Lewis Mumford, who in a review of Nader's "Unsafe at Any Speed," wrote that people had become too accepting of the abstractions that are used to justify the unblinking acceptance of technology, e.g., money, power, etc. Mumford suggested that until some consensus could be reached about "what constitutes a valid human life," that humanity would continue to be subject to the intended and unintended consequences of technology and the technocracy that creates it. (Incidentally, unintended consequences are often called externalities in business school, a word that neatly sets these deprivations outside of the corporation in the same way they are channeled outside the corporation in the form of pollution, unemployment, and other forms of socially irresponsible behavior.) In between Pursell discusses the rise of the technocratic class from the imposition of Taylorism to regime of Fordism and into the postmodern age of production. It is a big subject, and Pursell, admittedly, has to carefully choose his examples to quickly advance his fairly familiar thesis; that from a nation where technology was early on fairly democratically distributed,

technologies were introduced which placed technology and therefore power into the hands of fewer and fewer people. Not just material technology, of course, but the technology of the scientific approach. Pursell does a particularly good job on the rise of the technocratic class of civil engineers around the time of the Civil War through the present, men such as Herbert Hoover, who, for their clients built mines, canals, dams, roads, bridges, railroads all over the world. In so doing, they spread the gospel of science as embodied in the instrumental uses of capital. In addition they also managed to pocket a good deal of gold. Pursell suggests that these technological imperialists were backed up and supported by the U.S. government from fairly early on, and, that they continue to be, now as then, helped most forcefully through the generous funding of the military industrial complex. Pursell also covers the reaction against the technological elite in the 60s and 70s -- the era when "Silent Spring," "Small Is Beautiful," and other influential works began to question the so-called "success" of the modern technological world. Pursell suggests that the environmental and other allied movements, while important, have done little to arrest the trajectory of the Megastate -- to use Sheldon Wolin's characterization of the snug relationship between government and the corporation. Jerry Brown's tenure as governor of California and his founding of the Office of Appropriate Technology (OAT) is used to good effect as an example of the hopeful spirit of that time when Americans were beginning to question the top-down technology solutions that prevailed, e.g., nuclear power vs. solar power. Pursell notes the backlash against such programs was quick and brutal: Ronald Reagan as governor of California immediately pulled the plug on all eco-friendly initiatives. Never one to let facts get in the way of his pro-business program, he once charged that "trees cause pollution." An admirable performance, this work neatly and with insight gives the general sweep of technological history in the U.S. Very good illustrations are featured, many from the author's collection, and the captions for these are particularly good as they have considerably more sting than the generally neutral and sometimes muffled language of the text. For those who wish to explore the subject further, the book also features a very good bibliography and notes section.

This is one of the best scholarly treatments of the history of technology in the United States. The work is well researched, and represents the result of a career-long effort by the author to come up with a lively history of something--technology--that sits at the heart of the American experience. It is very disappointing to see reviews like the one submitted under the first customer review. It reveals a lack of a strong culture of reading, and both understanding and appreciation for authors (and scholars) and the work that they do.

This book is by far the most boring thing ever written. The only reason I can find for someone to ever want to read this thing is if you are being forced to. I have fallen asleep at least 3 times while reading this because it simply just is not interesting. The book rambles on about things and just continues digging deeper into the issue and manages to circle around and end up right back to where the writer began. Ultimately reading this book has been pointless and extremely boring. Do not read this it is a waste of time.

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