

Technology Journal -- Books: Technology, Prosperity and Values --- Are the Fruits of the New Economy Good or Bad for Society?

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The title of this book filled me with dread. Had [Dinesh D'Souza], Reaganite wunderkind turned think-tank inmate, jumped on the bandwagon of William Bennett, the professional scold who mysteriously entranced an audience of millions with the tiresome claptrap of his Book of Virtues? Was this "Chicken Soup for the Techno-Billionaire's Soul?" It does look as though Mr. D'Souza might have been trying to hitch a ride on Mr. Bennett's success but fortunately this book is better than the title suggests. It is a reasonably serious, albeit derivative, discussion of whether technological change and the wealth it can create does society more harm than good.

Relentless consumption has created a decadent world that has stripped people of their connections to one another, runs this argument, which Mr. D'Souza presents as somehow new. Actually, it goes back to ancient times, when the first old fogeys complained that it was better in their day while younger cavemen rolled their eyes. To Mr. D'Souza's credit, he does put forth the counter arguments that Ms. [Gertrude Himmelfarb]'s view of the world is absurdly romantic and there isn't much to cherish in poverty and backwardness.

The Party of Yeah, mostly such techno-eminences as George Gilder put forward the view that technology lifts all people in a society, and that Silicon Valley has created a more democratic spread of wealth than any previous economic boom. Mr. D'Souza jumps on this not-unreasonable line but then carries it too far, essentially saying that America is now so wealthy that problems of poverty have been solved.

FULL TEXT

"The Virtue of Prosperity:

Finding Values in an Age of

Techno-Affluence"

by Dinesh D'Souza

Free Press

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Mr. D'Souza has made something of a career out of bandwagons, or rather of jumping on them at that critical moment just before they've faded from the radar screen but after everyone else has done the heavy lifting of research.

Just out of college, he attacked the U.S. education system for its political correctness long after this was an issue on campuses. More aggressively and tendentiously, he wrote a book denying the existence of racism in the United States, building this idea with some discredited intellectual scaffolding.

Now he has taken on the issue of technology, prosperity and values.

The debate, as Mr. D'Souza sees it, is divided between the Party of Yeah, those techno-utopians who feel every development in science and technology is good for humanity and the Party of Nah, who question the value of much of what has been thrown up in recent years, particularly by the technology boom in Silicon Valley.

For those in favor of technology, the enormous wealth generated by innovation is a good thing, spurring further development, improving the lot of people around the world. The Party of Nah sees a widening gap between rich and poor and the emergence of a winner-takes-all system that condemns some people to permanent membership in the underclass.

Mr. D'Souza expands this familiar division into left- and right-wing critiques of the New Economy. The arguments go beyond the familiar criticisms of income inequality to include an emerging conservative anxiety in the United States that technology is undermining social values. Affluenza is creating a world where little Brittany comes back from school feeling upset because her friend Tiffany has two houses and she only has one.

He quotes at length Gertrude Himmelfarb, a right-wing economic historian who feels modern society has become pathological and lost its core values.

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Like the devil, the techno-utopians get the best lines in this argument. As one put it, "Those who say money doesn't buy happiness just don't know where to shop." Beyond pure consumerism, technology, far from undermining essential human values may actually strengthen the family and create new types of community. In the sections on biotechnology, the arguments in favor of genetic manipulation are essentially that if people are sick it is better to cure them than to hold back because of anxieties over designer children.

The Party of Yeah, mostly such techno-eminences as George Gilder put forward the view that technology lifts all people in a society, and that Silicon Valley has created a more democratic spread of wealth than any previous economic boom. Mr. D'Souza jumps on this not-unreasonable line but then carries it too far, essentially saying that America is now so wealthy that problems of poverty have been solved.

His argument centers on the sophomoric "I-was-sad-I-had-no-shoes-until-I-met-a-man-who-had-no-feet" line that nobody in America is poor because they all have televisions and air-conditioning. Unsurprisingly, his experience of

poverty seems to come from an examination of a few arid statistics whereas his experience of wealth comes from hanging out with lots of cool Silicon Valley billionaires.

Consequently his breezy dismissal of what it is like to be poor in one of the most unequal societies on earth is somewhat grating. Ultimately this book doesn't say much more than that technology throws up a myriad quandaries for societies and we should just deal with it.

All told, Mr. D'Souza, a research scholar at the right-wing American Enterprise Institute, doesn't say much more than that technology throws up a myriad quandaries for societies and we should just deal with it.

All the same issues are tackled with far greater depth, intelligence and wit in "A Future Perfect" by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge.

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