

Why, you'd take us back to the horse and buggy

by [Murray N. Rothbard](#)

The basic fallacy of this all-too-common cliché is a confusion between technology and such other aspects of human life as morality and political principles. Over the centuries, technology tends to progress: from the first wheel to the horse and buggy to the railroad and the jet plane. Looking back on this dramatic and undeniable progress, it is easy for men to make the mistake of believing that all other aspects of society are somehow bound up with, and determined by, the state of technology in each historical era.

Every advance in technology, then, seemingly requires some sort of change in all other values and institutions of man. The Constitution of the United States was, undoubtedly, framed during the "horse -and-buggy" era. Doesn't this mean that the railroad age required some radical change in that constitution, and that the jet age requires something else? As we look back over our history, we find that since 1776, our technology has been progressing, and that the role of government in the economy, and in all of society, has also grown rapidly. This cliché simply assumes that the growth of government must have been required by the advance of technology.

If we reflect upon this idea, the flaws and errors stand out. Why should an increase in technology require a change in the Constitution, or in our morality or values? What moral or political change does the entrance of a jet force us to adopt?

There is no necessity whatever for morality or political philosophy to change every time technology improves. The fundamental relations of men — their need to mix their labor with resources in order to produce consumer goods, their desire for sociability, their need for private property, to mention but a few — are always the same, whatever the era of history. Jesus' teachings were not applicable just to the ox-cart age of first-century Palestine; neither were the Ten Commandments somehow "outmoded" by the invention of the pulley.

Technology may progress over the centuries, but the morality of man's actions is not thereby assured; in fact, it may easily and rapidly regress. It does not take centuries for men to learn to plunder and kill one another, or to reach out for coercive power over their fellows. There are always men willing to do so. Technologically, history is indeed a record of progress; but morally, it is an up-and-down

and eternal struggle between morality and immorality, between liberty and coercion.

While no specific technical tool can in any way determine moral principles, the truth is the other way round: in order for even technology to advance, man needs at least a modicum of freedom to experiment, to seek the truth, to discover and develop the creative ideas of the individual. And remember, every new idea must originate in some one individual. Freedom is needed for technological advance; and when freedom is lost, technology itself decays and society sinks back, as in the Dark Ages, into virtual barbarism.

The glib cliché tries to link liberty and limited government with the horse and buggy; socialism and the welfare state, it slyly implies, are tailored to the requirements of the jet and the TV set. But on the contrary, it is socialism and state planning that are many centuries old, from the savage Oriental despotisms of the ancient empires to the totalitarian regime of the Incas. Liberty and morality had to win their way slowly over many centuries, until finally expanding liberty made possible the great technological advance of the Industrial Revolution and the flowering of modern capitalism.

The reversion in this century to ever-greater statism threatens to plunge us back to the barbarism of the ancient past. Statists always refer to themselves as "progressives," and to libertarians as "reactionaries." These labels grow out of the very cliché we have been examining here. This "technological determinist" argument for statism began with Karl Marx and was continued by Thorstein Veblen and their numerous followers — the real reactionaries of our time.
