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## Our Readers Comment

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# Our Readers Comment

## *Professor Eddy Challenged*

The article by Samuel K. Eddy entitled "Climate in Greco-Roman History" [*Syracuse Scholar* 1 (1979-80): 19-30] has an interesting viewpoint and utilizes new data in the interpretation of ancient history.

However, there are a number of serious flaws in the article. The first and probably the most serious is concerned with the relationship between the growth rings of redwoods, silt layers, and ancient crops. Material like this is ideally suited for analysis using correlation coefficients. If this approach were used, then the author would not have to *assert* that a relationship existed but could quantify it and decide the likelihood of the relationship occurring by chance. One cannot blame the reader for being skeptical if the relationship is averred when it could have been made precise. Compounding this is the use of percentages. It is very difficult to know exactly what the author means on page 20 by either 83 or 85 per cent, when two ratio measures are involved: "For the Greek period (650-252 B.C.) the trees [growth rings of the California sequoias] were in agreement with [the Greek harvests]...in 83 per cent of the cases, and for the Roman period (30 B.C.-A.D. 400), in 85 per cent."

Figure 2 compares, according to reigns of Roman emperors, the thickness of California sequoia rings and the number of contemporaneous building starts and dedications in Africa. This is also very misleading and does not present data in a straightforward manner. First of all, the reigns are not of equal length. Second, the *two* measures on the vertical (dedications of building starts in Africa, in units; and thickness of sequoia rings, in millimeters) are completely arbitrary and calculated to mislead. Simply to have plotted the average number of dedications per year would have seriously altered the relationship. The best presentation would have been two separate graphs.

The last flaw is one of opinion. On page 23 the author refers to "the Dark Ages of evil memory." Much scholarship has gone into an investigation of the period between A.D. 400 and 800. If one thing seems certain it is that the old preconceptions are misconceptions. To continue these attitudes seems clearly unscholarly. The next page contains another passage that should be omitted: "the vicious, childlike Germans who lived outside the Empire and the passive, childlike Christians who lived inside it." These excerpts represent personal opinions which are neither scholarly nor accurate and thus should have no place in a scholarly journal.

In summary, the article points to some possible relationships, if they could be seriously substantiated with accurate statistics; many historical topics such as this can certainly be improved by the careful use of statistics to quantify relationships. While the purpose of visual material is to provide clarity, the graphs here do not. Finally, the author superimposes on the reader a number of purely personal and nonscholarly opinions as well as terms which at best are imprecise (like “morally weakened” on page 27).

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## *On “Technology and Human Freedom”: Some Questions*

Patrick Daniel Moynihan’s recent article, “Technology and Human Freedom” [*Syracuse Scholar* 1 (1979-80): 59-64] raises a number of fundamental questions about the relationship between technology, human freedom, and democracy. If I read him correctly, Mr. Moynihan’s position is that democracy and freedom are in trouble because of a lessening emphasis upon technological innovation and development. There is undoubtedly considerable truth to this position; however, it is built upon a series of assumptions that deserve questioning. The purpose of these comments is to explore briefly some of these assumptions in order to shed light upon Mr. Moynihan’s position.

Mr. Moynihan correctly suggests that technology has “politics.” That is, the often-held view that technology is simply a source of tools with meaning only in terms of how they are used is false. Langdon Winner in his recent article “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” builds the case for this position forcibly and well. Technology has radically altered social relationships in ways that maintain patterns of domination. It has also been the source of changes that have proven to be liberative—such as, for example, the invention of printing. This is the point that requires attention. Mr. Moynihan seems to assume that the fruit of technology—more choice—necessarily leads to democracy and increased freedom. Though I may be slightly overstating his position, it is, nevertheless, apparently his position.

Freedom obviously involves more than choice. Certainly, most of the choices made in a lifetime are of little consequence, involving nothing more than decisions between pleasures. At the very least, freedom involves the ability to see genuine alternatives and the possession of sufficient power to act upon them. There are two points to be made here, one concerning the nature of the

choices to be made, and one concerning the impact of technology upon humans' abilities to make choices.

There is no question that in developed nations people face decisions that in former historical periods were unimaginable. The realm of product selection is the most obvious area of choice expansion. The existence of the supermarket underscores this development. Some of these decisions are of major importance: Should I use foods which have chemical additives? Should I buy biodegradable picnic plates? And so on. While it is true that choices have been broadened, there is an important sense in which genuine options have also come to be limited by technology. The nature of this limitation is most clearly communicated by Ivan Illich's concept of radical monopoly, where choices are limited by the domination of certain technologies. The result of this is that genuine options become unimaginable or, if imagined, unrealizable. Recently one radical monopoly, that of the domination of the internal combustion engine and the automobile over American lifestyles, has come to be questioned. The impact of this domination over American social relationships is, of course, widely recognized.

The domination of certain technologies over others is based primarily upon economic considerations that may or may not attend to human values associated with human freedom and democracy. What, for example, passes for chemistry research in American universities is today what industry and government decide it is. This is a major point. While it is true that in a certain and very important sense the area of human choice has been greatly expanded by technology, it is also true, as Mr. Moynihan briefly notes, that technology has limited our choices. The nature of this limitation is of profound significance. Increasingly human institutions, such as government and schools, respond to technological developments rather than control them. For example, recently James Schlesinger, then Secretary of Defense, announced a major but largely unnoticed change in American nuclear weapon policy to include the employment of limited nuclear war—a policy long contrary to America's defense posture. What Schlesinger did was simply acknowledge what is generally known: American weaponry has become so accurate that there is no fundamental difference between offensive and defensive weapons. Technology has made this distinction meaningless. In short, American weapon policy is, to an increasingly important degree, gradually coming to be dominated by technological development. This leads to the second point, concerning the impact that technology is having upon our abilities to make decisions. This point goes beyond the important but commonplace observation that an information explosion has made significant human decision making nearly hopeless for an average person, who must rely upon positioned experts to look out for, and in some ways define, his needs and interests. (Obviously this has major implications for human freedom; however, it is not my central point.)

Recent sociological and educational literature often comments upon the developing of America's sense of a loss of

community. This loss, whatever it is, is intimately wrapped up in present feelings of nostalgia and escapism as well as the upsurge of interest in finding one's "roots." It is very likely that the single most important contributor to this development is technology and the kind of ends-means rationality that it demands. What we are witnessing in response to the increased systematization of human experience (which often carries with it a loss of feelings of potency) is the development of a kind of technocratic consciousness. This development has significant implications for the health of American social institutions and American freedom and democracy. Increasingly the realm of genuine human decision making is coming to be confined to the area of means rather than ends. That is, the practical imperatives of technology associated with living within an increasingly complex social-economic-political world preclude reflection upon ends which are perceived as given and/or built into the structure of things and unquestionable. Technocratic consciousness requires that people come to be treated, and to treat themselves, as means rather than ends. Thus they base their decisions upon system imperatives rather than upon an understanding of the human implications of the decisions to be made. Progress and profit provide the rationalizations for such action, while depoliticalization and objectification are its human manifestations. There is, in short, an abdication of the responsibilities of freedom that takes place while, paradoxically, there may be a sense of possessing great personal freedom. It strikes me that Mr. Moynihan may very well have fallen into this trap himself.

It is interesting, or example, that Mr. Moynihan uses economic growth as his standard by which to gauge the health of the nation. The assumption is that technology leads to economic growth, which leads to increased freedom. The relationship between economic growth and freedom is at best a questionable one. The problem is essentially one associated not with growth but rather with a just and equitable distribution of goods and services. Economic growth of itself has little importance for human freedom beyond the point at which basic human needs are capable of being fulfilled; a point long since passed by the so-called advanced nations. Mr. Moynihan seems to assume that more is better and less is worse — that more technology will solve technology-use problems.

Mr. Moynihan concludes his article by raising a most interesting hypothesis: that "perhaps a certain waning of the passion for liberty among us has brought a slackening in our rate of technological advance." The assumption here, which is suggested elsewhere, is that freedom-loving people produce technology in part as a response to maintaining their freedom. Mr. Moynihan laments that as a nation we do not contribute more of our money to national defense. This view is troublesome, especially given former Secretary Schlesinger's statement and the recent behavior of Pentagon officials interested in locating the MX missile in Utah and Nevada. If we follow this logic to its conclusion, we get something like this: if we spend our

national income on defense, we will significantly increase our technology, which will increase our freedom. The other way of stating this is to say that if we are truly freedom-loving people, we will put our money into national defense, which will increase our technology, which will increase our freedom. Though overstated, the point should be clear. The real danger is not so much that we will underfund our national defense/war effort but rather that we will establish as our national priority, at an even more significant level, the building of war industry and technology. Mr. Moynihan recognizes that technology is not politically-socially neutral, and surely this is the case with war-related technology as well. What then appears as Mr. Moynihan's major point is really that our freedom, in his view, depends upon America maintaining its world domination, and technology is central to maintaining this domination. If this is the case, human freedom is indeed in even more trouble than Mr. Moynihan suggests.

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