# The Myth of Neutral Technology: Lessons from "Power and Progress"[1]

## Review of the Book Power and Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity by Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson

Power and Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity by Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson explores how technology has shaped society throughout history and how its benefits have often gone to elites while ordinary workers have borne the costs. The authors argue that people should work with companies and politicians to ensure new technologies are developed and organised in ways that genuinely help people. The book shows that ordinary people have always contributed to innovation, not for status or money, but to make work more efficient and improve life.

## Introduction

A major idea in the book is that political and social power heavily influence the direction of technology. Those with money, status, and power often control how technology develops, and society tends to follow their lead. Today, this can be seen in the rise of techno-oligarchs who dominate technological progress without involving ordinary people. However, the book also shows that throughout history, ordinary people have organised and fought back, changed their conditions, and demanded a fair share of progress.

1 Acemoglu, D., & Johnson, S. (2024). *Power and progress: Our thousand-year struggle over technology and prosperity.* Basic Books UK.

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# 1. Summary

The book argues that technology is never neutral; it reflects the vision and interests of those who hold power. Throughout history, technological progress has often come through exploitation, with workers bearing the burden while elites capture the gains. Ordinary people continuously contributed to innovation, but their role was rarely recognised or rewarded fairly. Early thinkers like Francis Bacon believed science would give humans control over nature. Yet, this vision ultimately helped create a two-tiered society in which elites benefited while ordinary workers fell behind. Whether productivity leads to higher wages depends on choices: technology can be developed to create new human tasks and opportunities, or used purely for automation that displaces workers and concentrates power.

A major theme of the book is that people in power frequently misuse their positions to reshape society. Political leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher are cited as examples of how power can be leveraged to weaken labour movements and favour corporations. Reagan's actions against organised labour and Thatcher's aggressive anti-union policies reduced workers' bargaining power and weakened institutions that once helped distribute productivity gains more fairly. Similarly, the influence of Milton Friedman's doctrine, which argued that the sole responsibility of business is to maximise shareholder profit, reshaped industries by encouraging companies to cut wages, reduce worker protections, and prioritise stock prices over human well-being, reinforcing inequality and corporate dominance.

Historical examples further illustrate the dangers of narrow vision and overconfidence. When Ferdinand de Lesseps successfully built the Suez Canal, he thought he could replicate the same layout in Panama, but the Panama Canal failed because he ignored evidence, relied on forced labour, and refused to adjust course to suit the different nature. This case shows that progress depends on learning from reality rather than blind techno-optimism. Other historical moments, such as British enclosure debates and the writings of Arthur Young, demonstrate how elites actively shaped "progress" to maintain their advantage, keeping ordinary people disadvantaged.

The book emphasises that power works not only through force but also through ideas, persuasion, and agenda-setting. Leaders influence society via status, charisma, and storytelling, and once a vision takes hold, it becomes difficult to alter. This process explains how narratives like "big finance is good" spread, giving powerful actors more control over technological and economic outcomes. Nevertheless, ordinary people retain power through collective action, social norms, and pressure on elites. In the past, workers and citizens organised to challenge elite control, forcing a more equitable sharing of gains from new technologies. Today, rising inequality, environmental degradation, and social extremism indicate that decision-makers are once again ignoring human suffering in the name of progress.

Ultimately, the book shows that technology's impact on society depends on the choices of those in power and the counterbalance created by organised citizens. Technology is biased, it tends to favour wealth, status, and elite interests unless institutions and social movements actively work to protect ordinary people. The authors conclude with a caution that modern digital technologies and artificial intelligence risk accelerating a return to a deeply unequal, exploitative system, unless society learns from history and deliberately guides technological progress toward shared prosperity.

## 2. Analysis

The book excels at demonstrating that technological development is not an autonomous force but is shaped by the choices, visions, and power of social elites. It convincingly shows how those with political influence, financial resources, and social status can steer innovation to serve their interests, often at the expense of ordinary workers. By tracing historical examples, from industrial-era factory owners to modern techno-oligarchs, the authors reveal a consistent pattern that power amplifies influence, and societies tend to follow the lead of those in control due to imitation, persuasion, and agenda-setting.

A key analytical insight is the book's focus on the interplay between technology and human agency. While innovations have frequently been built on the labour and ingenuity of ordinary people, their contributions have rarely been recognised or fairly rewarded. Yet the book also highlights that collective action, labour movements, and regulatory institutions have historically provided mechanisms for redirecting technological progress toward shared prosperity. This duality underscores an essential argument: outcomes are not predetermined by technology itself, but by the social, political, and economic contexts in which it develops.

The text also invites reflection on modern parallels. Today, digital technologies and AI are being shaped by a narrow group of powerful actors, often without public input. The book's historical lessons suggest that the concentration of technological power risks replicating patterns of exploitation and inequality. However, the authors made it clear that ordinary people retain the capacity to influence these developments through organisation, advocacy, and regulation. This emphasis transforms the work from a historical account into a practical framework for thinking about contemporary technology policy.

While the book is compelling in its critique of power dynamics, it is less intense in offering concrete economic or policy solutions. Its focus on historical patterns and explanation sometimes comes at the expense of actionable guidance for how societies might systematically protect workers and broaden participation in technological decision-making. However, the book didn't mention the Dot-Com bubble that happened in the early 2000s, which is very important due to the rapid changes occurring with AI. Nonetheless, its analytical strength lies in connecting long-term historical trends with present challenges, demonstrating that technological progress is the product of deliberate human choices rather than inevitability.

## 3. Opinion

I found this book to be a wonderfully smooth and engaging read. It flows seamlessly through history, offering a wealth of information that can be applied in daily life. The authors present clear and convincing accounts of how concentrated financial, political, and social power shapes the direction of technology and society. History repeatedly shows that when power is concentrated in the hands of a few, those groups can manipulate systems to serve their own interests, often pushing ordinary people to the margins.

The book contains cautionary tales about overconfidence, narrow vision, and the human costs of privileging elite perspectives. I particularly appreciated how it highlighted ordinary innovators, such as George Stephenson, whose contributions improved society yet were often overlooked. As the narrative unfolds, the authors' vision becomes increasingly clear: the relationship between technological change and social power spans generations, and progress is driven by deliberate choices rather than automatic technological forces.

The book emphasises that technology's effects depend on social structures and collective action. When workers have strong institutions, labour movements, and supportive regulation, technology can expand opportunities and improve the quality of life. Importantly, the text makes it evident that ordinary people are not powerless; social pressure, organisation, and resistance have historically compelled elites to share prosperity more equitably.

## Conclusion

The book ultimately illustrates that technology is shaped by power, vision, and human decisions rather than by fate. Elites have often directed progress for their own benefit, while ordinary people have fought to reclaim agency in shaping their societies. Through its historical examples and analysis of political, economic, and social forces, the book emphasises that technological change is neither inevitable nor inherently beneficial, it depends on the choices of those in power and the collective action of society.

Its central message is that the future of technology will hinge on whether people remain passive or actively ensure that innovation serves human needs rather than consolidating power in the hands of a few. Despite its limited guidance on modern economic frameworks, the book provides a compelling warning about the consequences of overconfidence, narrow vision, and unequal power. It is both a cautionary tale and a call for awareness, responsibility, and collective action to shape technology in ways that benefit society as a whole.

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