

The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900. *By David Edgerton.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. xviii + 270 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$26.00. ISBN: 0-195-32283-5.

Reviewed by David Hochfelder

“Much of what is written on the history of technology is for boys of all ages. This book is a history for grown-ups of all genders.” Thus David Edgerton begins his provocative book. He seeks to correct what he regards as the dominant emphasis in the field, a focus on novelty. He argues that historians have too closely linked technology with the terms “invention,” “innovation,” and “diffusion,” and that we have failed to create a “use-based” global history of technology. Noting that most of the world’s population is “poor, non-white, and female,” he identifies “creole technologies,” or older small-scale technologies (what others might call “appropriate technologies”), that are adapted if not designed for local use (pp. ix–xiv).

In Edgerton’s view, historians have taken for granted the significance of some technologies while downplaying others. Thus, a leading concern for him is to determine how technological importance should be evaluated. He regards use of a technology as more important than its innovation. This shift in focus brings to the foreground simpler, less glamorous technologies. After all, he claims, the condom is more important than the airplane, and the bicycles on the Ho Chi Minh trail proved superior to the B-52 bomber. He rejects the notion that new technologies are obviously superior to older ones. New technologies always engender resistance, and older technologies often persist alongside the new. He reminds us that “living in an inventive age requires us to reject the majority of [new technologies] that are on offer” (p. 210).

While historians have been preoccupied with invention and innovation, Edgerton urges historians to examine hitherto hidden aspects of technology and to devote more attention to household production, tools locally used and produced, and the maintenance of things. After all, he observes, “The inventing of things has been concentrated in a few places; the making of things is much more widely distributed; the using of things is usually much more widely

distributed still” (p. 80). The issue of repair and maintenance also exposes a rift between rich and poor. As any Westerner who has ever disposed of an old toaster or microwave oven can attest, “repair is hardly worth carrying out” (p. 81). Yet in poor countries, as demonstrated by the elaborate network of automotive repair shops in Ghana, maintenance is a primary concern for users; it has also engendered a degree of technological engagement and creativity no longer found in the West.

Edgerton concludes by urging historians to broaden our focus, to ask questions about “the place of technology within wider historical processes,” in order to “wean us off the idea that invention, ‘technological change,’ and the ‘shaping of technology’ need to be the central questions for the history of technology.” Adopting his approach, instead, “can help us rethink history.” After all, given the technological nature of modern life, “to rethink the history of technology is necessarily to rethink the history of the world. . . . The historical study of things in use, and the uses of things, matters” (pp. 211–12).

Edgerton’s book deserves, and will no doubt reach, a wide audience. Historians of technology will find a great deal to reflect upon, as Edgerton calls on us to question our assumptions about technology, innovation, and use; the methods and predispositions we use to study it; and the objects and techniques we regard (and reject) as “technology.” Global and transnational historians will also profit from his discussions of global transfers of knowledge and goods, particularly his concept of “creole technologies.” Although business historians will find this book of less direct use, it will no doubt stimulate reflection, creativity, and new subjects of study for us as well.

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