AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search
http://ageconsearch.umn.edu
aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

BY RICHARD A. LEVINS

A Foray Into A Strange World

But does the exercise answer the central question?

In *The Environment, Our Natural Resources, and Modern Technology,* Thomas DeGregori reminds us, "To those committed to an idea or movement, accuracy and truth become secondary considerations." He provides a convincing argument that this is the case for many who oppose technologies that DeGregori credits with significantly improving our lives. But as he tries to convince us that "the technology of what is possible is the goal to which we should always strive," one wonders if he, and perhaps the Editors at Iowa State University Press, should also take that reminder more seriously.

A few pages into his book, DeGregori assures us that he will not "flip out and do harm to others." Thank goodness, for I was already starting to worry. In spite of the "extraordinarily fascinating and extremely happy life" he claims to lead, he writes like a man on the edge. Much of his frustration arises from his long and futile search to answer this question: "If modern science and technology are killing us, why are we so healthy and living so long?" It's a compelling question, but the very wording leads ultimately to a disappointing book.

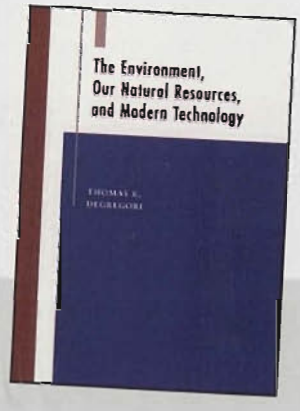
The question "why are we so healthy and living so long?" is a fine subject for inquiry. A person making such inquiry would, I presume, thoroughly research the effects, both good and bad, that science and technology have had on our quality of life. Not everyone would agree with whatever conclusions were drawn, perhaps, but the book would be well worth reading.

"Others buy recordings of nature sounds that are actually made by flushing toilets, and some justify lavish lifestyles as 'downsizing'".

Adding "if modern science and technology are killing us" to the question creates problems, however. DeGregori uses this as a springboard to a carefully researched foray into the strange world of those who challenge the benefits of science and technology. Such an approach has two problems. First, most of us would probably agree that opposition to technology comes in many forms, so the need for such a book falls into question. Second, and more seriously, the exercise does nothing to answer the central question of our improved standard of living.

Here's a good example. DeGregori begins his final chapter with a reference to John Zerzan, a man pictured as so opposed to all that is modern that he sees even the development of speech and symbolic thinking as wrongheaded. Nonetheless, according to DeGregori, he has developed a "myriad of followers." This "merry band of followers have (sic) become major participants in street demonstrations". In 45 pages of references, the only mention of Zerzan's work is a single book chapter. Could his influence be somewhat exaggerated here? Regardless, street protestors may call attention to important questions, but they do not provide the type of answers one would expect to find in a book such as this.

The Environment, Our Natural Resources, and Modern Technology is comprehensive at least in this way: a more thoroughly documented parade of technophobes, ranging from green consumers to "Luddite postmodern intellectuals" would be hard to imagine. Some insist upon



The Environment, Our Natural Resources, and Modern Technology

by Thomas R. DeGregori. Published by Iowa State University Press. 272 pages. $54.99.

wearing underwear made from organic cotton. Others buy recordings of nature sounds that are actually made by flushing toilets, and some justify lavish lifestyles as "downsizing". When the enemy might at first glance appear reasonable, DeGregori provides his own interpretation, no matter how bizarre. Proponents of local food production, for example, apparently use concern for local economies, energy conservation, and healthy foods only as a smokescreen. Actually, they are anti-global elitists who act out of fear they will be deprived of "that sense of exclusivity for the items which they consume."

"It is not enough to set up and destroy straw men when so much is at stake."

Couldn't we, just once, have a thoughtful exposition of why some favor a particular technology while others oppose it, followed by deliberate evaluation of which position is more likely right? Not here. The model is consistently one of showing many strange people making strange claims, thereby somehow implying that the author's unwavering faith in technology is fully justified. For example, opponents of food irradiation are swept aside by pointing out that similar objections were made in the 1920's to pasteurizing milk.

In the interest of full disclosure, I have a working relationship with some of the organizations that most bother DeGregori. My experience leads me to some very different interpretations of their activities. For example, DeGregori grudgingly describes the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy's effort to promote eco-friendly coffee as "worthy", but he takes the group to task for setting up a for-profit venture to sell the coffee. Even the briefest of visits with IATP and its officers would show this to be a reasonable effort to make a product available to the public and not the shameless exploitation for personal gain that is implied.

I have also had the pleasure of meeting Donella Meadows and collaborating with her Sustainability Institute. DeGregori, like many other writers, seizes on the inaccuracy of the predictions in Limits to Growth. Going further, he claims that the misguided prophecy also led to wasted investment in commodity production and consequent gluts. Here, it would seem appropriate to at least mention that the Sustainability Institute, under the direction of Meadows until her death, has an ambitious computer simulation effort to model the system dynamics of commodity production in several areas. Some discussion of the many errant prophecies for biotechnology, computers, and other technologies DeGregori finds so attractive, would also seem in order.

In general, *The Environment, Our Natural Resources, and Modern Technology* provides a lesson that we all (this reviewer especially) need to hear from time to time. It is not enough to set up and destroy straw men when so much is at stake. There are intelligent people on both sides of every issue, and others on both sides who do not appear to be so gifted. Understanding the best of both sides is an important first step toward providing enduring answers to society's most perplexing questions. Cataloging the outrages on either side, however, wastes time and energy that might otherwise bring us closer to the truth.

Richard Levins is Professor in the Department of Applied Economics at the University of Minnesota.