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John Michael Greer: False Promises

IFG Teach-In: Techno-Utopianism & The Fate of the Earth
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Introduction by Richard Heinberg

Next I'm very happy to introduce my good friend John Michael Greer who describes himself as an historian of ideas which may just be a fancy way of saying he's a really smart and entertaining person. He's the author of 30 books including *The Wealth of Nature: Economics as if Survival Mattered* (2011) and one which is in the pipeline right now called *After Progress: Reason and Religion at the End of the Industrial Age* (2015) which I'm very much looking forward to.

He's also the author of The Archdruid Report which is a weekly blog that I highly recommend you tune in to John's weekly musings. Happy to introduce John Michael Greer.

Thank you Richard. The points that Dr. Huesemann has made are crucial to keep in mind. Because, of course, he's quite correct. The quack nostroms beings pushed by the techno-utopia crowd these days can't and won't fix the crisis of industrial society. It's critical to keep that in mind as we proceed. But there's a further reason why all the current hand-waving about tech fix is a waste of time. And it's that further reason that I want to talk about now.

Why don't we start with a show of hands. How many people in the audience today got here by jet pack? Anybody? How about flying cars – did you travel here that way? Did you have any trouble getting in to the big glass dome they were supposed to put over New York City by now? How was your last vacation on the moon? Oh, and that electricity too cheap to meter that we were all supposed to get from safe, clean, nuclear power, how's that working for you? I think you get my point.

Since the Second World War the American public has been barraged with any number of allegedly serious statements by allegedly serious thinkers about all the wonderful new technologies we were going to have that were certain to arrive in the very near future. Every generation has had its own potted techno-utopia marketed by the media like so much soap.

It's educational as well as entertaining to turn the pages of old magazines, see what today was supposed to look like. If you do that, make a list of all the technological advantages that were supposed to happen by now and then glance over the list and see how many actually did happen.

What you'll find is the vast majority of those predictions never came true. Most of the ones that did pan out, had massive down sides that nobody had expected. Or were economically unworkable even if they were technically feasible. When all those pundits insisted that by the year 2000, Well of course we would have cities on the moon and a cure for cancer and household robots \who could cook for you. They were wrong. It really is that simple.

They were wrong. The future they were predicting did not happen. The public and private funds that got spent getting ready for that future were wasted. And a galaxy of other options, many of which were arguably even better in [the] first place went by the board because too many people were daydreaming about jet packs.

I'd like to suggest that the same thing – exactly the same thing will happen with the gaudy, high-tech fantasies, currently being retailed by the techno-utopian crowd. It doesn't matter how much enthusiastic rhetoric gets buttered across the media. It doesn't matter how many glossy pictures of nano this and cyber that get Photoshopped for your benefit. Been there, done that – and I'm still waiting for my flying car.

There is very good reason to think the vast majority of techno-utopia daydreams are never going to come true. And I'll get to that in a bit. But first of all I want to confront the automatic reaction that pops up in most people's heads whenever you suggest there are hard limits to what technology can accomplish.

A bit of history is useful here. Over the last couple of centuries faith in organized religion has taken a beating in most of the industrial world. A great many people have had a hard time believing in the existence of God or what have you. But most of those people still had the emotional needs that belief in God once filled. So they started looking for surrogate deities and of course they found them.

Half the cultural history of the last two hundred years has been the story of the rise and fall of a theme park full of ersatz deities. We had nationalism, worshipping an assortment of nation states. We had racism, worshipping [an] even more motley assortment of arbitrary ethnic categories. And the list goes on.

But the most important pseudo-deity of all – the one that's become the focus of most people's faith these days is progress. I've come to think – I mean that quite literally – I've come to think that belief in progress is the unacknowledged established religion of the modern industrial world. Once something gets labelled as progress, people by-and-large stop thinking; they stop asking

hard questions; they just bow down and worship. And one of the hard questions they don't ask is *just what makes a given change count as progress?*

What is it that assigns one thing the coveted tutle of progressive, advanced, the wave of the future, and label something else regressive, backwards, primitive? Social, cultural, technological changes don't come with those labels preprinted on them. How do they get assigned?

There are two answers to that question and both of them have something to teach. The first is very straightforward. What determines that thing A is progressive and thing B is not is politics. There are always projects vying for funding. There are always power holders who are looking for gimmicks to secure influence and wealth for themselves. The result is that this project gets defined as the next step in the glorious onward march of progress and that one doesn't purely because somebody's interests are advanced by the first and not by the second.

I'm old enough, for example, to remember when supersonic transports were the wave of the future. Then their backers got outmaneuvered in the ongoing scrimmage at the government feed trough, the public refused to support the technology, and oops!, they weren't the wave of the future after all. Roll out the next future.

If this suggests to you that there is something distinctly arbitrary about what gets enshrined as progress, well, yes, that's what it suggests to me also.

Let's stop here and notice what this implies about the old saw, You can't stop progress. If supersonic transports were progress, as certainly that's what their backers said at the time, why yes you *can* stop progress. That's why we don't have to put up with the environmental impacts of supersonic transports just now.

Since the word progress is nothing more than a label for whatever happens to get funding, when somebody says, 'You can't stop progress,' what they're actually saying is, 'Don't you dare stop progress because my interests are at stake.'

So progress is political. But there's another side to the question. You can trace it right there in the basic meaning of the word.

What does "progress" mean? When it's not applied to technology or society, when it's stripped of pseudo divine drag, and stands there blushing in etymological nakedness, it means continued movement in the same direction. Progress means going further in the direction you're already going. It means doing what you've always done. These days increasingly it means doing the same thing you've always done but expecting a different result, which as many of you doubtless know is a good working definition of insanity.

There's a reason, in other words, why much of what gets proclaimed as progress these days actually and inevitably makes things worse. It's called The Law of Diminishing Returns. What that law says basically is that as you proceed with any activity the relationship between costs and benefits does not remain the same as it was when you started. Sooner or later you pass the point of diminishing returns and your benefit for unit cost starts to decrease. After that you pass the

point of zero marginal return and additional expenditures don't add anything to the benefit you get. And after that additional expenditure yields a negative marginal return. That's called a loss in plain English.

In simpler terms, first you spend more and get less, then you spend more and get nothing, and finally you spend more and lose. If you watch the progress of technology in recent decades this may seem very familiar.

Now the law of diminishing returns is a principal with extraordinarily wide application. It applies to scientific research. It applies to drilling for oil. It applies to knocking back beers. (I promise you the fifteenth beer is not going to do you as much good as the ones that came before it.) And anything else you care to name.

But the heart and soul of our modern faith in progress is that it doesn't apply to progress. To believers in progress, if a little is good, a lot is better, and too much is best of all. If technology causes problems why then the solution is more technology. And if that causes bigger problems, hey we need more technology, still. Whatever the question, technology is the only answer they're willing to think about.

Now, most of us found out at some point in our adolescence that there is in fact such a thing as drinking too much beer. Most of us have noticed that the same principle applies to pretty much everything else, too. Our cultural biases insist that it can't apply to progress.

But I think it's time to say, Stop right there. Let's actually look at the costs and benefits. And let's be very clear what we mean here. By progress I don't mean some vague sense of betterment – variables not defined. I mean, doing more of what we've been doing in the last 300 years – that is to say turning everything into an excuse to build more machines.

As I think we've all started to notice, that's not working too well. From anthropogenic climate change, to peak oil, to the rest of the long list of troubles we're facing, all of them are either caused or worsened by technology. By the consequences of what the conventional wisdom called progress. Anthropogenic climate change – that comes out of our tailpipes and smokestacks. Peak oil – would be zero problem if our techno-structure didn't depend on it. And so on down the list.

As [Theodore Roszak](#) pointed out a good long time ago, we haven't gotten to the brink of planetary catastrophe by accident. Nobody dragged us here. We've *progressed* here. And all we need now is one more round of progress to shove us over the edge like lemmings in a Disney nature film.

Thus I'd like to suggest that technological progress – doing more of what we've been doing for the last 300 years – has passed the point of negative returns. On the average, that is, every new technology we deploy, every further step in the so-called march of progress, costs more, accomplishes less, and causes more problems than it solves.

So we don't need more technology. We need *less* technology. That doesn't mean no technology at all. It's a standard red-herring to say, 'Well if you don't want to deal with this latest snazzy thing,

you want everyone to go back to the caves.' We've all heard that, right?

Is this nonsense? Yes, Socrates, this is nonsense. We're talking about asking the hard questions about technology that the conventional wisdom refuses to ask.

We need technologies. But we need wiser technologies that recognize the limits of a fragile planet. Technologies that *progress* in the opposite direction from today's techno-utopian fantasies.

One thing I point out about these wiser technologies is they're within reach. They are by and large, simpler than our existing technologies. They're much more efficient in their use of energy and resources.

A great many of them already exist. In fact people have been working on them since the nineteenth century, though most people have not been taught about that. [See "The Retro Future," and *Green Wizardry Conservation, Solar Power, Organic Gardening, And Other Hands-On Skills From the Appropriate Tech Toolkit* (2013)]

They don't require unspecified scientific breakthroughs. What they require is the willingness to recognize that, as Einstein said, we can't solve a problem by the same thinking that got us into it.

And by the way we can't maintain the lifestyles that depend on making the problem worse.

Now there's one other thing that is required here, which is the willingness to recognize just how empty the promises are that the techno-utopians are making.

You already heard various discussions of various techno-utopian claims. You'll hear a lot more in the rest of this weekend. All of those claims presuppose that the law of diminishing returns doesn't apply to whatever technology we have in mind here. That we can expect all the breakthroughs we want just because we happen to want them.

And I'd like to suggest that there's an agenda behind those frankly improbable claims. Like the jet packs and the flying cars, they offer pretty daydreams of better living through technology to distract people who might otherwise make a different world for themselves.

Look at what's actually happened over the decades we were supposed to be getting those jet packs and domed cities. What actually happened is that the standard of living for the vast majority of Americans has dropped like a rock. When I was a boy an American family on one working class income could by and large afford to a buy a home and a car and pay all their bills. Nowadays an American family on one working class income is probably living on the street.

The future we got wasn't the future we were promised. And this latest round of plastic tomorrowland is more of the same. Another round of nano bread and cyber circuses to keep the rabble quiet. It's working too.

Look at us: we're spending most of this weekend talking about their agenda – not about ours. So

they've already taken the first round. But behind the glossy Photoshopped images of a future that's never going to arrive is just more of the same. More impoverishment, more environmental degradation, more broken promises to put on the shelf alongside the jet pack future we never got.

We can do better than that. Frankly we have to do better than that. And one of the first steps to doing that, it seems to me, is to recognize that there's nothing inevitable about the techno-utopian agenda. Quite the contrary, if we've learned anything from the last 7 decades, it's that grandiose technological fantasies proclaimed as the inevitable wave of the future, generally end up in history's dumpster.

We can expect the nanotechnology, the biotechnology, all the stuff that's being babbled about now – and don't even get me talking about the singularity – all of it: into the dumpster right next to the jet packs.

It's important to critique the current round of fantasies, but it's even more important to remember that we can take another route. We can "progress" in a different direction, each of us and all of us toward the simpler, wiser, more sustainable technologies we need to help us reach a future worth having.

Thank you.

John Michael Greer is the Grand Archdruid of the [Ancient Order of Druids in America](#) and the author of more than thirty books on a wide range of subjects, including peak oil and the future of industrial society. He lives in Cumberland, MD, an old red brick mill town in the north central Appalachians, with his wife Sara.

On John Michael Greer's writings, see, for example:

- [The Archdruid Report](#) – Druid perspectives on nature, culture, and the future of industrial society
- [Three Fallacious Arguments: An Interlude](#), 21 Oct 2014, from [The Well of Galabes - Reflections on Druidry, Magic, and Occult Philosophy](#)
- Three Books by John Michael Greer: [*Star's Reach: A Novel of the Deindustrial Future*](#) (Apr 2014), [*Not the Future We Ordered: Peak Oil, Psychology, and the Myth of Progress*](#), (Feb 2013), and [*Decline and Fall: The End of Empire and the Future of Democracy in 21st Century America*](#) (Apr 2014) – A [Review by Frank Kaminski](#), originally published by [Mud City Press](#), in [*Resilience*](#), 13 Oct 2014
- [The Falling Years: an inhumanist vision](#), [J.M.G.](#) writing in [*Dark Mountain: Issue 1*](#), Summer 2010, a publication of [The Dark Mountain Project](#)

and film:

- [Economics Energy & Environment Conference 2014 - What Can One Person Do?](#) (59:54)