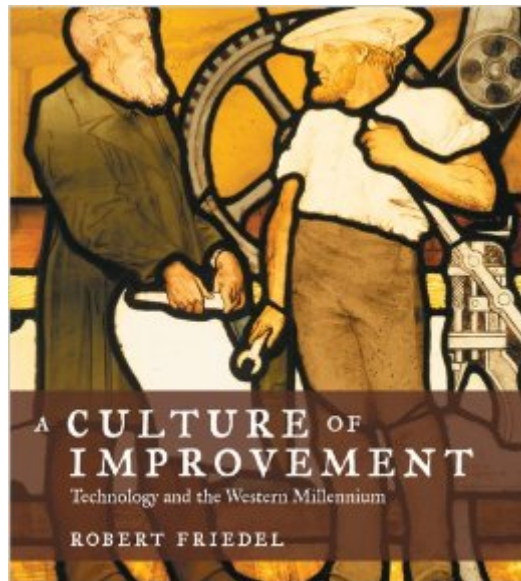# A Culture Of Improvement: Technology And The Western Millennium (MIT Press)

# Synopsis

Why does technology change over time, how does it change, and what difference does it make? In this sweeping, ambitious look at a thousand years of Western experience, Robert Friedel argues that technological change comes largely through the pursuit of improvement -- the deep-rooted belief that things could be done in a better way. What Friedel calls the "culture of improvement" is manifested every day in the ways people carry out their tasks in life -- from tilling fields and raising children to waging war.Improvements can be ephemeral or lasting, and one person's improvement may not always be viewed as such by others. Friedel stresses the social processes by which we define what improvements are and decide which improvements will last and which will not. These processes, he emphasizes, have created both winners and losers in history.Friedel presents a series of narratives of Western technology that begin in the eleventh century and stretch into the twenty-first. Familiar figures from the history of invention are joined by others -- the Italian preacher who described the first eyeglasses, the dairywomen displaced from their control over cheesemaking, and the little-known engineer who first suggested a grand tower to Gustav Eiffel. Friedel traces technology from the plow and the printing press to the internal combustion engine, the transistor, and the space shuttle. Friedel also reminds us that faith in improvement can sometimes have horrific consequences, as improved weaponry makes warfare ever more deadly and the drive for improving human beings can lead to eugenics and even genocide. The most comprehensive attempt to tell the story of Western technology in many years, engagingly written and lavishly illustrated, A Culture of Improvement documents the ways in which the drive for improvement has shaped our modern world.

# Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

" Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a pathway to your door" Emerson wrote. The distinguished historian of American Civilization Daniel Boorstin believed that the heart of the American uniqueness was precisely in those improvements in material life, those accumulated advantages in creature comforts. Now Robert Friedel has come to lavishly illustrate for us the idea that the ' culture of improvement' is what Western civilization through its technology has been over the past millenium.Friedel traces innovation by innovation the historical development of a whole host of technologies. From cheese -making to supersonic aircraft we learn how certain technologies 'take off' and others lose their way in the shuffle of social events. We see too how time and again key individuals have been responsible for breakthrough developments which move mankind forward.Friedel is well aware that the development of Western technology is not a one- sided altogether positive story. The weapons of mass - destruction that threaten mankind, and a wide range of threats to the earth itself come in part as result of technological developments.Still overall there is the sense that human life and society have tremendously benefited by the creative innovative powers of Western technological culture.This is a very rich work from which a tremendous amount can be learned not only about the development of specific innovations- but about the overall progress of society through them.

Several years ago, the education channel in our town had a show called "Connections" in which the story was told of how common things of the modern world came to be through the most fantastic journey of inventions. This book encompasses just about everything we have today and tells how it all came to be. But, the author goes to the extreme of telling not just aobut the inventors, the tinkerers and the capitalists who profited from them, it tells the intriguing human side of technology and how it impacted the lives of the people who benefited and also suffered because of them. It is a remarkably detailed adventure through the history of how modern people came to be. I found it to be a book I could hardly put down and once I did, I was eager to get back to it. It takes the reader from the first black smiths to the super sonic transport, from the invention of thread and yarn making to the launching of satellites. It is the remarkable story of western civilizations, north of the Mediterranean, west of the Volga, and how they advanced steadily, relentlessly and with ever

quickening pace to make the world we know. Do not expect gratuitous recognitions to other cultures or apologies to nature or to overtaken primitive societies. This is a factual, no-holds-barred history of industry and how the European men and women made things that made things happen. It explores ruthlessly the insanely driven mechanics, the dusty masons, the sooty handed artisans who were there at the first laying of the foundation corner stone of western civilization. I strongly recommend this book to anyone who wants to find out just how it is we arrived here and now.

The book itself is full of information, but it goes into so much detail that I found it a little dry. That's just my personal opinion. It read it but only because it was required text in one of my innovations class. The subject matter is interesting, but it's not largely my cup of tea. Still, there's a lot of good information in here.

This book is such a treasure trove . . . A thrilling read of constant discovery.We live in a complicated world and this amazing piece of scholarship reveals how it came about. Everything we take for granted. How it happened. From the plough to the microchip, I was constantly surprised and excited to discover how things really came to pass. The story of so many individuals' struggles to improve and innovate is inspiring.This is a big book. When I began I had no idea of what riches it would be reveal. (the eBook version is easier to handle) but every pages offers new insights. A great and absorbing read.

I'm sorry you had to get this book for school. I'm sorry that you go to school. You are an embarrassment to the University of Minnesota. This is a fine book and doesn't deserve one star even if Mr. Teacher made you sad and made you read one time.

I loved how the chapters were divided and it comes a nice span of time in history. Definitely worth the buy!

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