

# PROMETHEUS BOUND

## WHAT THE POOR OWE THE RICH

by Fred L. Smith Jr.

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The forces of change associated with technology have never been popular. Technology is routinely blamed for waste, environmental degradation, cultural homogenization, job losses, and lifestyle complications. But perhaps the most powerful criticism is that technology exacerbates social inequality. Critics of technology focus on the perceived suffering of two key societal groups: consumers and labor.

To many, it is obvious that technology only benefits the well-to-do; the poor don't own computers. But consider the gains that technology brings to the physically handicapped. Physicist Stephen Hawking lost his ability to speak or to move more than a finger because of motor neuron disease. A computer program allows Hawking to write books and scientific papers, and to lecture throughout the world. Absent that technology, the thoughts of one of the greatest scientific minds of our age might have been locked away forever.

Moreover, the benefits of technology rebound to the marginalized, while the burdens of such changes are typically borne by the rich. Driven by vanity, boredom, risk aversion, or raw one-upmanship, the rich seek out new technologies at great expense, and the masses reap the benefits. The rich are the white mice of society. One need only take a look at products marketed to the wealthy a few decades ago to understand the *injustice* done to our privileged class. The rich buy the slow computers, the tapes with ephemeral

eight track or Beta formats, and the suitcase-sized cell phones. It is their eager consumption that initiates the creative-destructive process that disseminates technology's benefits downward through society.

The rich explore technological frontiers and expedite the passage to market of products and services that otherwise would be delayed for decades. When the automobile was known as the "rich man's toy," it was at its most dangerous. It was the rich who demanded the seat belts, ABS brakes, air bags, and crumple zones that are now standard features in almost all automobiles. In effect, rich motorists of that period spilled their blood for the safety mechanisms that protect the rest of us today. Indeed, that is how safety glass emerged. When French chemist Edouard Benedictus learned in 1903 that most injuries in automobile accidents resulted from shattered windshields, he developed a type of glass that held together on impact. By the time lower income people got behind the wheel, there was little risk that a minor accident might prove fatal.

Labor activists often mourn the supposed bias of technology. But historically, technological innovation has been biased in favor of unskilled workers. The invention of the musket enabled unskilled civilians to be as effective in battle as bowmen who had dedicated their lives to archery. Forklifts have made it easier for women to work in areas once dominated by men. Spell checking allows the

dyslexic to compete on an equal footing with the spelling champion. Translation software may soon allow us to interpret any number of foreign languages; the skills of the polyglot will be acquired with a few key-strokes, rather than a few lifetimes.

Today labor activists argue that low levels of union activism in high-tech sectors is prima facie evidence that technological advances harm workers. That is false. In fact, a longstanding conundrum of economics is that industries where profits are higher tend to pay all workers more—clerical workers earn more in the computer industry than they do in the textile industry. It is slow-growth, technologically static industries that statistically pay lower wages to low skilled employees. Efficiency gains yielded by technology mean higher wages as well as relatively cheaper products and services for all.

Hobbes's vision of life as "nasty, brutish and short" was inspired by life in a technologically stagnant society. Hobbes wrote in an age when Western European GDP was doubling only once every five hundred years. In today's technologically fluid world, China's GDP has doubled in less than seven. Technological change is the friend, not the enemy of the handicapped, the poor, the laborer, and the consumer. In the short and the long haul, technology is the egalitarian force that always produces more wealth and more opportunity for more people.