



Communications

TO THE EDITORS:

Stuart Levine's review of my book, *Technological Utopianism in American Culture* (March 1986), so misrepresents and oversimplifies its contents as, I believe, to warrant a reply.

Contrary to Levine's summary, I discuss all twenty-five technological utopians in my third chapter (pp. 45–55) and not only in the appendix, which provides additional biographical information not suitable for the text. Unlike Elmer Suderman's 1961 Kansas dissertation, with which Levine compares my book, I am concerned with utopian writings not as isolated texts but as expressions of the views held by many Americans at the time. For this explicit reason (pp. 32, 165), which Levine fails to see, I put some of the biographical information at the end. Levine is a literary critic. I am a historian.

Again contrary to Levine, I discuss all of the utopian works in my second chapter (pp. 19–32) and scarcely use "*Looking Backward* to stand for them all." Of course the works "are identical in important respects": by what other logical criterion would I be justified in grouping them together? I do note minor differences (pp. 19, 32), but if other relevant differences are more important than the similarities, I would be eager to learn what they are.

I do not organize my book around Eugene Ferguson's undeniably seminal 1962 article because I am concerned less with the origins of American "know-how," as Ferguson was, than with its logical extension a century later as technological utopianism. Once again, Levine fails to see my explicit intent (p. vii).

Similarly, I spend time defining my terms because they have frequently been either loosely defined or left undefined. "Technology," "utopianism," and "ideology" have often been used as either buzz words or slogans. Levine continually rebukes me for waxing too "abstract," but to the extent I do so it is because I am *concerned with* concepts: I am writing about the effect of the *idea* of technological utopianism on American culture. For this reason Levine wholly misses the point of my disagreement with Leo Marx: we are

contesting less the evidence itself than its ideological significance. Consequently, Levine's reduction of my latter chapters to the notion that "life is crummy in modern America" indicts itself: I am concerned with the contemporary *reaction to* the failure of the utopians' predictions, not simply with the failure itself. I am most concerned with the impact of that failure on modern Americans' *thinking*.

Levine's faulting me for "arbitrarily" using the European Thomas Carlyle's "Signs of the Times" rather than Emerson's writings when discussing the American Timothy Walker's "Defense of Mechanical Philosophy" simply reveals his ignorance: Walker's essay was an *explicit* reply to Carlyle's views, not to Emerson's, and I make this repeatedly clear (pp. 81-87). Emerson is not germane to me here just because he is germane to Levine elsewhere.

Levine berates the University of Chicago Press for its poor editorial policies. I can assure Levine that my book did not get published without the enthusiastic support of established outside reviewers, who were considerably more careful in reviewing my manuscript than he was in reviewing my book.

Finally, I am sorry that, despite my extensive search for all pertinent secondary sources, Levine's own "articles on the impact of technological change on writers and artists" never surfaced. If I wanted, like him, to engage in mean *ad hominem* arguments about motives, I would suggest that my failure to cite him prompts his ill-spirited remarks.

HOWARD P. SEGAL
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TO THE EDITORS:

Mr. Segal misunderstands what was intended as a friendly if critical review. To the extent that the review can be misunderstood, I owe him an apology, and ask him to look more closely at what I actually wrote. In saying that *Technological Utopianism* had "forgivable weaknesses," I was sincere. I am glad to hear that his publisher's consultants liked the manuscript; had I been one of them, I also would have recommended publication, though I would have urged the editors to help him present his ideas more effectively. My review said that he was sharp, that he knew his topic,

that, commendably, he connected it to the work of other scholars and to larger issues, and that the book was “fruitful”—that is, that it suggested further applications and relationships.

I observed that there was not much close analysis of the twenty-five utopian writers, but figured that this was because the material was not in itself terribly revealing, perhaps because it expressed ideas which were already widely accepted. Mr. Segal says as much on page 102: “As we have seen, there was limited need for multiple declarations of the gospel of progress and of progress as technological progress.” I am not, as we shall see, the only reviewer who felt the book too thin in “close analysis of individual texts,” but I assumed that this was, as Mr. Segal writes in his objection, because the works were “identical in important respects.” More an observation than a criticism—the book left my curiosity about this literature a little unsatisfied.

Similarly, when I noted that “Segal could have organized his entire book around the relationship between his utopias and the tendencies that [Eugene] Ferguson was the first to recognize,” I meant exactly what I said—“*could* have,” not “*should* have.” I was making a favorable observation about the richness of the topic, which ties to so many aspects of nineteenth-century American life that Segal could have organized the book in any of a number of ways. I *was* critical of organization, but even there blamed not Mr. Segal, but his editors. Of this more later.

I quite agree that he was not obliged to connect Emerson to Walker just because I find the subject interesting. He is of course right about the special connection between Walker and Carlyle. I meant to be helpful, because Emerson connects sensationally well, and readers of this journal have special interest in Emerson. Perhaps Mr. Segal missed what I intended in reactions of this sort: they are part of a general argument, summarized toward the top of page 143 in my review: “Thus Segal’s study, though very specialized, is germane to scholars of New England culture.” That was to recommend it. I tried to illustrate other connections which *Technological Utopianism* had suggested to me. Pretty high praise, really, to say that a book is “fruitful”; this means that its ideas bear other ideas. There is no implied criticism that given ideas did not occur to the author.

I don’t quite follow Mr. Segal’s argument about the Suderman dissertation. Suderman does not view the religious novels merely

as “isolated texts.” His dissertation is a very different document in its method from Segal’s book, for while Segal leaves readers itching for more evidence so they can judge for themselves, Suderman if anything overwhelms with evidence. I think that Suderman would be the first to agree that it would have taken pruning and editing to turn his solid dissertation into an effective book. That is the point that I was making: good theses, not good books. Needed reorganization, good editorial advice. What is commendable in the work of both scholars is that they have thought about the connections between their evidence and larger issues.

My treatment of Segal’s engagement with Leo Marx’s ideas is not very negative, either. The strange organization of the study, I say, makes the reader fear that Segal is not going to connect his work to formulations by major scholars of larger issues. But I reassure readers that in fact he does so finally. I’ll stick by my argument that Mr. Segal did not display enough of his evidence to enable one to judge whether his suggested modifications of Marx’s “middle landscape” are justified, but I was very pleased to see the discussion, and will retain an open mind. I even tried to reconcile one apparent disagreement between the two points of view.

I will stick also to what I said about the thinness of evidence in *Technological Utopianism*, though when I said that Mr. Segal was apparently using *Looking Backward* to stand for others, I did not mean to complain. Since *Looking Backward* is well known, I was willing to take Mr. Segal’s word that the important things that are true about it for his argument are true about the others as well. I have no quarrel with what he says about his concern with concepts. I do think that we need more evidence to make the discussion of concepts convincing. I found myself unable to judge the validity of certain conclusions because the author hadn’t given me enough sense of what was in the works under discussion. None of this says anything bad about Mr. Segal.

I have searched through my review for evidence that I criticized Mr. Segal for not making use of things that I’ve written. I just can’t find any. The quotation in the angry last paragraph of his response is not from my review, but from the little biographical sentence which follows it. I’m not sure, either, what he means by “mean *ad hominem* arguments about motives.” I did say that “thesis authors are thrilled to get their tomes into print”; I know I would have been. That is not mean; it’s kind and friendly, part of my argument

that the faults are “forgivable” and more to be blamed on editors than author: “Chicago editors did a bright author a disservice by letting the present book through in this form.”

I guess that I could be angry about Segal’s (*ad hominem*?) statement at the end of his second paragraph (“Levine is a literary critic. I am a historian”), but to tell the truth I don’t know exactly how to respond. I’ve always thought that my field was American Studies. I have published a little literary criticism; I didn’t know that that was a bad thing to do. I like to think, moreover, that “even” my literary criticism has been informed by my training, reading and scholarship in other areas. I suppose I could, in self-defense, cite my education, if one defends oneself in such a way. At both Harvard and Brown, where I took my degrees, I took more history than anything else, so much that the History chairman at Kansas soon after I arrived in the late 50s told me I had more U.S. history training than anyone in his department; he was interested in getting me to teach history. I had nearly written a doctoral dissertation on a historical subject, have since taught U.S. history, was referred to as “the historian Stuart Levine” by a reviewer of a book I did with a group of mainly anthropologists, and am currently closest professionally to a couple of certified card-carrying historians who help me edit *American Studies*; I could go on. But to tell the truth, I don’t think of myself as a historian any more than I do as a literary critic. I guess that I just don’t get the drift of Mr. Segal’s statements about my profession, unless he means that literary critics insist on evidence and analysis, while historians don’t. I don’t think he does, I don’t think that’s true, and I don’t want to get snide.

Until my graduate editorial assistant reminded me, I had forgotten that the journal which I edit published a review of *Technological Utopianism* in its Fall 1985 number. What it says about the organization of the book is so close to my opinion that I quote parts of it to suggest that my reaction is not isolated. Paul Boyer calls it “this flawed but interesting little book.” He concludes:

Unfortunately, *Technological Utopianism in American Culture* adds up to somewhat less than the sum of its parts. Segal has already published thirteen articles on this subject (at least four of which form the basis of chapters in the present book), and the work at times seems more a disjointed collection of essays than an integrated whole. The 163 pages of text are followed by a nine-page biographical appendix, eighty-two pages of closely printed notes and a thirty-three-page unannotated bibliography. Many of the notes are themselves mini-essays—interesting enough, but

frustrating to the reader seeking to grasp the work as a whole. But although the book is less satisfactory than one might have hoped, Segal's topic is manifestly an important one, and he has thoughtful and provocative things to say about it.

I agree with all Mr. Boyer says, including what is positive. Indeed, I think that perhaps my over-all feeling toward the book is more favorable than his, and I am sure that Mr. Segal is misreading what I said.

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