

Technology and Society

Technology and Society: A World History explores the creative power of humanity from the age of stone tools to the digital revolution. It introduces technology as a series of systems that allowed us to solve real-world problems and create a global civilization. The history of technology is also the history of the intellectual and cultural place of our tools and devices. With a broad view of technology, we can see that some of the most powerful technologies such as education and government produce no physical object but have allowed us to coordinate our inventive skills and pass knowledge through the ages. Yet although all human communities depend on technology, there are unexpected consequences from its use which, as Ede shows, form a crucial part of this rich story.

Andrew Ede is a historian of science and technology whose research focuses on the intersection of science and technology in the twentieth century. He is the Director and founder of the Science, Technology and Society Program at the University of Alberta. Professor Ede earned his doctorate at the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology at the University of Toronto. With Lesley B. Cormack, he is the co-author of the best-selling *A History of Science in Society*. He is a member of the Canadian Society for the History and Philosophy of Science, the History of Science Society, and the Society for the History of Technology, and was the program coordinator for the Three Societies Meeting in 2016.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42560-5 — Technology and Society
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TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY

A World History

Andrew Ede
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 **CAMBRIDGE**
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108425605
DOI: 10.1017/9781108348539

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First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd, Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Ede, Andrew, author.

TITLE: Technology and society : a world history / Andrew Ede.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2019. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2018033892 | ISBN 9781108425605 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781108441087 (paperback)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Technology – Social aspects.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC T14.5 .E37 2019 | DDC 303.48/3–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018033892>

ISBN 978-1-108-42560-5 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-44108-7 Paperback

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Contents

<i>List of Maps</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xi</i>
1	Introduction: Thinking about Technology 1
2	Technology and Our Ancient Ancestors 26
3	Origins of Civilizations 41
4	The Eastern Age 62
5	The Mediterranean World to the Islamic Renaissance 83
6	The European Agrarian Revolution and the Proto-Industrial Revolutions 107
7	The Industrial Revolution and the Rise of European Power 128
8	The Atlantic Era 165
9	Domestic Technology: Bringing New Technology to the People 204
10	The Second Industrial Revolution and Globalization 230
11	The Digital Age 252
12	Conclusion: Technological Challenges 291
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>308</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>313</i>

Maps

3.1	The Taurus and Zagros mountains.	43
3.2	Ancient Egypt along the Nile.	56
4.1	China.	64
5.1	The Mediterranean world.	85
6.1	The triangle trade.	124
8.1	The British Empire in 1918.	181

Figures

- 1.1 Two communication networks. 24
- 2.1 Stone tools. 31
- 3.1 The domestic dog. 48
- 3.2 Pyramids at Giza. 58
- 3.3 Comparing the Great Pyramid to the Empire State Building and Chartres Cathedral. 58
- 4.1 Stages of horse harnesses. 66
- 4.2 Horizontal waterwheel. 70
- 5.1 Column and beam construction. 94
- 5.2 Tension and compression forces on a stone beam. 94
- 5.3 Force distribution in an arch. 95
- 5.4 Floor plan of the Pantheon. 96
- 5.5 Interior cross-section of the Pantheon. Source: clu/DigitalVision Vectors/Getty Images. 97
- 6.1 Carracks, galleon, galleys and fusta. 121
- 7.1 Cotton and cotton seeds. 135
- 7.2 Basic weave and pattern weave. 136
- 7.3 Top view of a boat or bobbin shuttle. 137
- 7.4 Anti-frame-breaking poster. 144
- 7.5 Etruria, Wedgwood's advanced pottery factory. Jewitt 1865: 394. 148
- 7.6 Pontcysyllte aqueduct over the River Dee. Finden and Batty 1823. 149
- 7.7 Wilkinson cannon boring machine. Rees 1820: plates vol. II. 151
- 7.8 Watt steam engine. Farey 1827: plate XI. 152
- 7.9 Nicolas-Joseph Cugnot's *fardier à vapeur* (steam cart) from 1769. 153
- 7.10 Blast furnace from the mid-eighteenth century. Ledeburg 1895: 403. ilbusca/E+/Getty Images. 155
- 7.11 Bessemer converter. Bessemer 1905: plate XV. 157
- 7.12 Bessemer converter with casting. Bessemer 1905: plate XVI. 157
- 7.13 Joseph Paxton's architectural drawings of the Crystal Palace from the Great Exhibition, 1851. 159
- 8.1 The 1832 profile of the Erie Canal. 172
- 8.2 American "black ships." 176

viii  LIST OF FIGURES

- 8.3 Charles Goodyear. “Charles Goodyear” 1891: 1. 184
- 8.4 Voltaic pile. 188
- 8.5 Thomas Edison. Photo Louis Bachrach, 1922. US Library of Congress.
Cph.3c05139. 192
- 8.6 *HMS Dreadnought*, 1906. US Navy photograph, 1906. 197
- 8.7 British Mark VII tank. British Government manual, 1918. 201
- 9.1 Rumford fireplace. 210
- 9.2 Diagram of John Gorrie’s ice machine. 214
- 9.3 General Electric Monitor Top refrigerator patent. US Patent 2002444 A,
1935. 215
- 9.4 Elisha Otis’s safety elevator patent drawing from 1861. 219
- 10.1 The Maginot Line. 239
- 11.1 Antikythera mechanism. Courtesy of Lead Holder. 255
- 11.2 Charles Babbage. *The Illustrated London News*, November 4, 1871, 4. 257
- 11.3 Portion of the Difference Engine. 1853 woodcut plate. Science and Society
Picture Library/Getty Images. 258
- 11.4 Comparing an Avro Lancaster bomber from the Second World War with a
Boeing 747 from 1970. 272
- 11.5 Grace Hopper and UNIVAC in a 1961 publicity photograph. Bettmann/Getty
Images. 276
- 11.6 Nuclear power generator. 283
- 12.1 Future checklist. 305

Tables

Intro.1	Human Stone Age eras.	29
3.1	Domestication of plants.	46
3.2	Domestication of animals.	47
3.3	Egyptian eras.	55
4.1	Chinese inventions.	64
4.2	Metal working.	68
4.3	The seven voyages of Zheng He.	79
5.1	Roman army units.	99
6.1	Technological acquisitions from the Crusades.	114
6.2	Estimated slave imports into the Americas by importing region, 1519–1866.	125
6.3	Population of European cities, 1500–1650.	126
7.1	Key inventions for the textile industry.	139
7.2	Rail mileage in the United Kingdom and the United States.	154
8.1	Cotton production.	174
8.2	Comparison of artillery rounds expended.	196
8.3	Dreadnoughts or dreadnought-scale ships produced by 1916.	198
9.1	Early skyscrapers.	220
9.2	Population density for Beijing and its suburbs.	222
10.1	Range of bombers.	244
10.2	Acquisition of nuclear weapons.	250
11.1	Pre-transistor computers.	267
11.2	Battery history.	287
12.1	Satellites by country.	299

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-42560-5 — Technology and Society
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Frontmatter
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Preface

The history of technology represents one of the most important thematic approaches to world history. It takes us from our ancient ancestors to the modern day, from stone tools and the discovery of fire to global transportation systems and supercomputers. Regardless of the vast increase in the complexity of the tools we have available to us today, our relationship with technology remains the same: We use technology to solve real-world problems.

Technology represents some of the greatest achievements of the human mind and made some of the darkest moments in history possible. Despite its importance to the study of history, there have been very few texts available for instructors and students at the undergraduate level. After many years of teaching the history of technology, in this book I provide a synthesis of various ideas and approaches to the question of technology as a key component of world history, based on the argument that technology is a system, not a collection of artifacts. Every form is imbedded in human society and requires human action to come into being, find use and in some cases be discarded. A hammer is only a hammer because it was created to do a particular thing, but both the maker and the user must have an understanding of what a hammer is for to make it useful. The hammer, by itself, is not the technology. It is the melding of the utility of the artifact and the conception of it that make a hammer an object of technology. There are also forms of technology that are not based on physical objects. Education and government are examples of these “invisible technologies.” Education is one of the most powerful technologies ever created, in part because it trains people to use technology.

The text identifies and discusses some of the pivotal moments in world history that have a technological component. It introduces a number of philosophical ideas that are important to thinking about technology, such as technological determinism and the problem of resistance to technological change.

I would like to thank my partner in everything Lesley Cormack for her help with this project. I would also like to thank my students, particularly those in the Science, Technology and Society Program, who inspired the creation of this book. In addition, the book benefited from the kind assistance of the reviewers whose encouragement and helpful suggestions improved the text.

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