

David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, Cambridge, MA,
The MIT Press, 1994, 362 pages



Esta reseña está sujeta a una licencia / Esta resenha está sujeita a uma licença
“Creative Commons Reconocimiento-No Comercial” (CC-BY-NC).

DOI: [10.24197/tst.49.2022.160-162](https://doi.org/10.24197/tst.49.2022.160-162)

In 1994, when the *American Technological Sublime* appeared to great acclaim, David Nye was already the go-to scholar for the social history of electricity, its most famous proponent, Thomas Edison, and the American company that bore its name, General Electric. But in this new work his view extended much further to ponder what we might think of as a philosophy of technological systems, and the peculiar (as so he claimed) American fascination with large-scale infrastructure projects. Electrical lighting, especially of urban spaces and other infrastructural objects such as bridges, dams, railroads, and skyscrapers, was now just one element under his historical microscope among many. Occupying a landscape already primed by nature for the contemplation of the sublime, Americans took what had been the preserve of educated elites in Europe – the philosophical contemplation of natural sites that induced awe and reverence – and democratized it. At the same time, they shifted their object of veneration from the purely natural to the increasingly human-made. If the Grand Canyon had a way of making one feel small when looking down into its vastness, the Hoover Dam, in a not-so-dissimilar natural environment, allowed one to feel great indeed about the achievements, or even conquests, made possible by human ingenuity.

From the early nineteenth century canal projects all the way to moon-rockets, Nye takes us on a chronological journey of sublime objects, or at least as they were so deemed by the American public. The objects of his focus initially find their sublimity in the approximation (or perhaps better to say appropriation) of natural elements and end by overcoming them entirely: not nature remade, but nature conquered. Not only could the dark be subdued, distance truncated, power multiplied, and the sky colonized, but people could enjoy a quasi-religious experience at the same time.

The story is not all sanguine, however. Nye reminds us that one might think the technological sublime would have worn out its welcome with the deployment of the atom bomb at Hiroshima. But instead, he tells us, something else happened entirely. The space program rescued the technological sublime by offering a new polish to lay over the terror unleashed by mili-

tary technologies of mass destruction. In turn, the space program was followed by the many-faceted ventures of Walt Disney and the geo-specific excesses of Las Vegas to supplement that cover-up with a technological fantasy world geared for pure entertainment. Nye takes us from contemplative awe to quasi-magical escape in two short centuries!

Of course, if this were all there was to it, Nye's book would not likely continue to loom so large in our intellectual consciousness these many years later, although it would still clearly be an excellent read on its own merits. That notwithstanding, the reason it continues to resonate strongly is that his method is so useful for thinking about new problems, not just the one he set out to explore. His insights can be transferred from one context to another as a tool of analysis, as it were, even if one's object is not to understand the appeal of the electric parade on Disney's Main Street, or the neon excesses of a strip in the Nevada desert. His categories – that is, what he understands as “the movement from word to spectacle, from individual to crowd, from nature to the machine, from substance to electric image (p. 277)” – are generally applicable to a wide variety of objects, processes, or cases. In these categories, especially when coupled with his prescient insights into the tensions between “high” and “popular” culture (p. 190), and the capacity for corporate participation in a technological sublime for the purposes of consumer and especially worker pacification (p. 222), Nye has gifted all historians of technology (or for that matter of society more generally) with a robust set of insights against which to test so many other phenomena.

I write not as an historian of technology *per se*, but rather primarily one of economic systems. The transformations that Nye uncovers for his subject resonate strongly for the last two hundred years of economic history too. The same technological innovations that provided the material objects that rendered so many observers awe-struck, also spurred the most rapid and far-reaching economic transformation in world history, or at least since the Neolithic anyway (and this could be a debatable point). What Deirdre McCloskey has called “the great enrichment,” could as easily be conceived in Nye's formulation as the movement from organic to inorganic (in modes of energy utilization), from substantive coin to Bitcoin (in effecting transactions), or especially from the local to the global (in everything from price-setting mechanisms to the shaping of tastes). New crises associated with the sustainability of a fossil fuel-driven economy, the possibilities for fraud and theft on a previously unimaginable massive scale enabled by crypto-currencies, and the rise of a world-wide populist backlash against the forces of globalization, especially as they pertain to

the remuneration of labor, all suggest that the parallel economic transformation may yet engender the full atom-bomb reckoning that Nye's technological sublime managed to avoid.

Such protests aside though, how likely is it that many people are actually eager (or even willing) to return to a world without instantaneous communication, high-speed transport, strawberries in the dead of winter, or entertainment on demand, to name just a few of the fruits of the economic and technological transformations of the last two centuries. Nye argued that the natural sublime of an earlier era (most especially the eighteenth century of European Enlightenment) was "oriented toward the eternal now;" in contrast to this he saw the technological sublime as overtly oriented "toward the future (p. 153)." It is hard to imagine any kind of sublime at all that is actually oriented toward the past. Can a world that has known the railroad be satisfied with a horse?

This is the quandary of our present moment, freighted with anxiety about reaching a point of environmental no-return, and entirely unsure how to ensure a broad spectrum of wellbeing to almost eight billion people. Can we provide high standards of living to many, or all, without drowning ourselves in waste? Can we support commerce and communication without being run down by the transport networks which facilitate them? Yet even in these conundrums, Nye can offer us some guidance. "History" he says, "is not a philosopher's argument. It records not logical developments but a mixture of well-reasoned acts, unintended consequences, accidents, shifting enthusiasms, and delusions (p. 291)." It seems unlikely that the accidents, delusions, and unintended consequences which still lie ahead will actually move us in the literal direction of the past. But they will move us into a future whose contours we cannot fully anticipate. I hope that some part of that future manages to include the awe that is still experienced even now by a small child when they see a locomotive rushing past.

ANNE E. C. MCCANTS
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
amccants@mit.edu