

# Social technology

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Technology has indisputably advanced. You don't need examples from me to see that progress marches on, and that we humans are doing a lot better than we were a millennium ago. There were mysteries that we couldn't solve even a decade ago that are just run-of-the-mill now.

Meanwhile, you may recall my in entry #189 . The interpersonal conflicts we have today are exactly the ones we were having a thousand years ago. People read Machiavelli or *The Bible* because these books address interpersonal conflicts that we have at the office all the time.

There are a dozen clichés about the contrast: the more things change, the more they stay the same, and history repeats itself, and maybe a few lines out of Shakespeare about the immutability of human nature. But it's worth asking why. ¿Why has our wonderful ability to invent new means of doing things and new technologies had absolutely no effect on how we go about interacting with other people? ¿Why does history repeat itself when biology and mathematics and physiology don't?

Here's my definition of Economics for the day: Economics is the study of conflict as a technological problem. We take the same tools that we used to study integrated circuits and populations of beavers and apply them to the problems of allocating resources among humans. And if you don't like how Economists are doing it, then there are other fields that cover the same questions of how people interact with different approaches and methods: Sociology, Game theory, Anthropology, Political Science, Law.

There's a fundamental optimism to it, that if we think hard enough about conflict, then we can resolve it better. We can actually build upon history rather than repeating it.

When I was at a Social Sciences department in a traditionally physical sciences school, we often got a line in the way of, 'well, the social sciences aren't really a hard science.' The standard witty retort is that no, they are much more of a hard science, because human behavior (especially in groups) is the hardest problem science has ever faced. Underlying that little witticism is a faith that the questions are hard but still solvable. Yeah, people's emotions and reactions are hard to predict, but we used to say that about the weather, and our three-day forecasts get better every year.

I'm increasingly losing faith in the fundamental optimistic premise of Economics. Believe it or not, the Iraq war was a big part of my loss of faith, because it destroyed any illusion that I'd had that I was somehow on the edge of history. Nope, I'm just Generation X, a demographic whose key distinguishing feature is its complete lack of any distinguishing features. The real problems of how people behave in groups—the

Shakespeare plots—aren't going to be solved, aren't even going to be step-toward-solved, by anybody alive today. We have them better classed and categorized and dissected (Prisoner's Dilemma, Stag Hunt, Matching Pennies), but the final step of teaching people to behave differently when faced with a Stag Hunt is still well beyond anything we economists could even contemplate.

Also on the list of completely obvious statements: a sense of progress is important. To a great extent, I think this is why we geeks are more interested in doing math and building stuff than in dealing with people. It's not that doing math is somehow easier, cleaner, or even less political—the math journals are still edited by humans, after all. But once you've proven a theorem or built a new toy, there it is, and the technique is now a part of our stock of elements, forever more. Meanwhile, any conflict you have now will be had again, possibly by you and the same other party, over and over. Once you kick the bucket, the theorem is still proven, but everything you learned about interpersonal anything is lost forever, and will have to be relearned by the next batch of people.

All of which inexorably leads us to the question of what our technological progress counts for when our social technology is resisting any sense of progress at all. We can rephrase the statement that history repeats itself to say that history never progresses, and I couldn't imagine anything more disheartening.