

RETROTOPIA

(JOHN MICHAEL GREER)

January 1, 2021

What will the future look like? Not much like our stupid present, certainly, but complaining about the present is easy, while offering a coherent positive vision of the future is hard—especially given the degradation of our present. Yes, the Age of Ideology is over, though its zombie corpse may stumble through the brambles of reality for a few more years, until someone shoots it in the head. But what will replace it will be an organic thing, its exact form hard to predict. In *Retrotopia*, John Michael Greer narrates an optimistic vision of a renewed America, or part of America. It's fiction, but it inspires a variety of thoughts, among them a topic of great importance to both Greer and me: is technological progress the enemy of tomorrow's human flourishing, or its ground?

Greer is one of those figures who is difficult to place politically, whom the ruling classes would call “fringe,” but who has a significant following among those across the political spectrum who like to think for themselves. He focuses on nature and the environment, and is a supposed archdruid, a practitioner of astrology and other aspects of the occult, so he might appear to fit on the Left. But as far as human society goes, he tries to be reality based, and that means his actual policy prescriptions often fit better on the post-liberal Right. Similar figures include James Howard Kunstler and Paul Kingsnorth. All of them are very pessimistic about the technological and industrial future, seeing collapse as inevitable, and preparation for that collapse essential.

It is 2065. The “Retrotopia” of the title is the Lakeland Republic, one of several successor states formed from the old United States, destroyed in the Second Civil War of 2029–2033. Lakeland consists of eight former states in the Midwest, roughly centered around Chicago (though Chicago itself is a “free city”). The book takes place in what was Ohio, and is framed as the journey through Lakeland by a diplomatic representative of the Atlantic Republic (more or less Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Virginia, and Maryland), upon the re-establishment of relations between the two countries after three decades of separation. Unlike the other successor countries, Lakeland has been largely cut off from the larger outside world for those decades, and little is known about it,

other than that it is mostly self-sufficient and avoids modern technology. The book follows the diplomat as he travels from Pittsburgh, in the Atlantic Republic, to Toledo, Lakeland's capital, and points around.

The world outside Lakeland is sketched as a worse version of today's America, with current economic trends extended forward. Everyone has to work like Sisyphus to eke out a miserable living, except for the rich. Healthcare and decent housing are unaffordable for most. An enhanced internet, the metanet, along with heavy police and military presence, pacifies the masses. The Second Civil War destroyed huge sections of infrastructure, which, despite constant borrowing and subsequent debt crises, have not been rebuilt in anything like their original form—except for the gleaming modernist palaces of the ruling classes. (The Second Civil War is somewhat vague; its trigger was ruling class refusal to take responsibility for infant deaths caused by a strain of GMO corn, but who fought whom and why is pretty opaque.) Economic specifics are lacking, but they involve cycles of borrowing and near-collapse, dependence on foreign countries (notably Brazil and China), and a hope that technology will break this cycle and allow a new age of innovation and growth. No identifiable aspects of today's wocketard Left appear, however; maybe they disappeared in the war, or more likely that aspect of today is just not Greer's focus.

The outside world, meaning at least some of the other successor states, has, for decades, attempted to destroy Lakeland, both through direct invasion and by attempts at "regime change" through actions short of war, such as embargo. All such attempts have been defeated. The cause of these attempts is that Lakeland refuses to accept loans that would be used to force it to maintain ties to, and politico-economic subservience to, the modern world, meaning the lords of international power, mostly monetary power. (No, this is not code for "Jews.") Lakeland prevails by having no technology that can be disrupted and by ensuring a nation able to be fully in arms, along with sabotage of its enemies where necessary. This isn't all that realistic, since in reality the outside world in this book has enough problems to deal with to make putting resources into overthrowing a landlocked bastion of autarky worthwhile, but let's roll with it.

To maintain autarky, and for practical and philosophical reasons we will turn to in a minute, Lakeland rejects public funding of any

technology past 1940, and imposes cultural strictures discouraging much private use of such technology. Even 1940s technology is not necessarily the standard; each county chooses to implement public infrastructure in one of five technological tiers, going back to 1820. The more retro, the lower the taxes. Family farming is apparently the main activity for the population, usually with horses and oxen (petroleum is nearly non-existent and the few motor vehicles run on heavily-taxed biodiesel). Towns and cities have been rebuilt in solid 1940s style; they are powered by modest amounts of central electricity, generated by manure, supplemented by point-source hot-water solar and wind. There is no internet, much less metanet, and no satellite access (portrayed as ubiquitously critical to the outside world's functioning). Business is conducted at a 1940s level, as is all physical culture. Clothes are throwbacks—made of high-quality, long-lasting materials, rather than the disposable “bioplastic” found in the outside world. Economically, Lakeland is somewhere on the continuum to distributism—the Grange is back in action, concentrations of wealth with disproportionate power are forbidden, and associations and other intermediary institutions are ubiquitous. Subsidiarity, rather than concentration, is the rule; banks are individual and tied to the community, for example. Automation is rejected as costing a society more than it provides, if properly accounted.

This is all an attempt to reify a major focus of Greer, what he calls “deliberate technological regression.” His idea is that we should not assume newer is better; we should instead “mine” the past for good ideas that are no longer extant, or were never adopted, and resurrect them, because they are cheaper and, in the long run, better than modern alternatives, which are pushed by those who rely on selling us unneeded items with planned obsolescence. No doubt he is a fan of David Sax's *The Revenge of Analog*.

It's all very retro—except that Greer's retrotopia explicitly rejects any kind of older social structures or core cultural practices. Everything in those realms is a left-libertarian's ideal 2020s America. The sexes are interchangeable; racial, ethnic, and cultural mixing and harmony are complete; gay marriage is treated as normal and commonplace; children are irrelevant; and drugs are fine, though they barely get mentioned. (And in an original if bizarre twist, atheists have well-attended churches with Sunday services where Mark Twain and Bertrand Russell

are offered as readings.) I doubt very much a society where men wear porkpie hats and ride streetcars because they make better sense than later offerings is going to throw rice, the symbol of fertility, at two homosexual men getting “married,” but okay, whatever. This reflexive obeisance to the gods of the present day, this refusal to countenance that returning to older social mores is both possible and necessary, is a common flaw in modern fiction writers who loathe the modern world. Greer’s treatment here bears a lot of resemblance to Kurt Schlichter’s portrayal of what I call “Agnostic Pragmatic Libertarianism” in his books. No doubt Greer would respond that he recommends mining the past, not returning wholly to the past, and that some things in the modern world are advances. That’s not a satisfying answer; if the modern world is uniformly awful relative to 1940, it requires robust blinders to pretend that none of the decline is due to changes in culture, especially when those changes were imposed on us, wholly inorganically. It would be far more logical to conclude that rolling back some or all of those changes is essential.

But let’s let Greer have his story. Yes, this is didactic fiction, message fiction. Still, it’s quite well done, and there is a long history of this sort of thing as a thought experiment, from Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* to the present day. The hook on which Greer hangs everything he says is that technological progress is a dangerous chimera beyond a certain point, which he pegs as that technology extant around 1940. In his analysis, the actual costs of any further progress exceed the benefits, and “progress is the enemy of prosperity,” for three reasons. First, he claims that technological progress as a whole is subject to the law of diminishing returns, so society will go backwards the harder it tries to go forwards. Second, he points to resource exhaustion—of oil most of all, but also of lithium, rare earths, whatever materials are crucial to maintaining an advanced technological society but of which supplies are limited. Third, like Joseph Tainter (whom he does not cite), he claims that ever-increasing complexity necessarily of itself leads to collapse at some point.

Of these three claims, the first two are more or less disprovable. As to diminishing returns, strictly speaking, Greer’s claim can’t be true, since the law of diminishing returns simply says that output will decrease past a certain point if all but one input is held constant and that one input

increased. Technology by definition can be used to increase output by bettering inputs, rather than simply increasing quantities of present inputs. Greer's claim is less technical, however—he analogizes the supposed process to art, claiming that any given art form eventually is perfected, such that it cannot be bettered, although it can be executed well—he uses jazz and classical music as examples, and by implication, when he shows the architecture of Lakeland, to architecture as well. At some point, innovations are “noise,” and “have fewer benefits and worse downsides than the things they replace.” These claims are obviously true, and although the simplistic answer is that culture is always changing, and part of a vibrant culture is new artistic elements, we are certainly in our decadent phase, not a vibrant phase. And maybe in high culture there is simply nothing truly new that is better than what has already been done; like sharks, evolved to perfection such that their form is static, maybe there is no new thing possible. My response is that mankind then has to put its creative energies into something else. We may have reached the age of decadence, but I don't rule out that a new, vibrant society could come up with new exemplars of truly great high culture, that will only be evident long from now.

But culture is not technology. Admittedly, some technology may be fully developed. When I was watching *How It's Made*, a television program that simply presents the manufacture of different items, with some of my children the other day, it featured the making of a geared unicycle hub. What was most interesting is that the gears were cut with two machines, which looked shiny and new—but were made in the 1940s and 1930s respectively. I wonder if such machines are even available now—I doubt it. I'd put money that the only modern option to cut gears is a fantastically expensive computerized CNC machine. We can, however, easily identify broad areas where technology is not fully developed. The key resource of all is energy, and we can all imagine better energy sources. True, unlike Saint Anselm's proof of God, that we can imagine it does not make it true, or possible, but if cheap fusion were developed, for example, it would destroy any claim that technology was subject to diminishing returns; it would reset the system (and reset, as Tainter identifies, many problems tied to complexity). Cheap energy would solve the Atlantic Republic's economic problems, certainly.

So while the suggestion has a facile appeal, it's not actually coherent to claim that technology as a whole is subject to diminishing returns. Tellingly, Greer does not offer a mechanism for this to be true; he states his claim as a self-evident truism. But there is no historical example of technological progress bringing low a civilization through diminishing returns—that is, through more value being put into technology than is returned. No doubt social media is a net negative, but it's not some law of diminishing returns that makes this so, but that social media is corrosive and stupid, so putting resources into it is like buying a hammer with which to hit yourself in the face. Yes, I complain, and often, that the technology we were promised hasn't arrived, but the problems we have now aren't the result of technology. Nor are they just structural and economic; again, they're much more cultural and spiritual, and today's technology evidences those problems, not diminishing returns.

As to resource exhaustion, on which Greer is also very focused, on a spreadsheet basis it seems compelling. But this concern, as with claims that overpopulation is a problem, ignores the creative ability of mankind. In the terms Charles Mann uses in his outstanding *The Wizard and the Prophet*, Greer is a prophet, one who does not believe that the wizards will find a solution to new human problems, self-generated or not. However, one hundred percent of the time, so far, the prophets have been wrong and the wizards right. That may change, but past performance is at least some indication of future results. Thus, if we got cheap fusion, we could mine asteroids for any resources we wanted. It doesn't have to be that (cheap fusion is a big "if"), but many advances are possible, and if history is any guide, likely. Yes, we won't do that on our current insane societal path, but again, that's not for the reasons Greer identifies.

Thus, the central pillar of Greer's predictions is that technological progress will inevitably stagger and fail, and in its failure, destroy any society organized around it, and empirically, this is false. Perhaps seeing this problem, Greer makes a major plot point of the book (spoiler alert) the utter destruction of all satellites, the basis of modernity, in all levels of orbit, through the "Kessler syndrome," a hypothetical event where fragmenting satellites may, through a chain reaction, destroy all other satellites. (Think the movie *Gravity* on a grand scale.) When this happens, Lakeland's relative position becomes unassailable. No

doubt it would be, but this is a *deus ex machina*—and only, in reality, even theoretically applicable to low-earth orbit. Greer does not seem to understand the vast amount of space that exists in higher orbits, making such a cascade impossible there.

But as I say, *Retrotopia* is message fiction. Leaving aside collapse, Greer's more modest claim is that new items "actually offer fewer benefits than the things they replace," and that they also have hidden costs. I agree that much of what is new technology today is often not a real net advance. For example, I think that if the internet disappeared tomorrow, after an initial period of disruption, we'd probably all be better off. Sure, we'd lose convenience. For example, I frequently use a weather app, Dark Sky, that provides highly accurate and highly localized weather data—not just temperature, but hour-by-hour cloud cover, precipitation, and much more. But without that, not only would I be able to live just fine, but likely I would learn more about the world around me, by observing, and I wouldn't waste time figuring out the weather, but just step outside to do whatever I needed to do. Thus, what seems like an advance is not as much of an advance as it seems. I'm hard pressed to think of a technological advance from the last thirty years that is crucial to our society in any way, and most of them cause more harm than good. Prove me wrong.

Medicine seems like an exception. Greer admits that Lakeland's medicine isn't very advanced ("tinctures" are offered, with the assurance they are just the same as the pills one can get outside Lakeland), but waves this problem away. Actually, he attempts to invert the problem by noting that routine medical care is much cheaper in Lakeland than outside. And the outside has, it appears, a two-tier system not dissimilar to the one we have in today's America, where a small slice of society gets excellent health care, a wide range of middlemen get rich from manipulating the system, and a large slice of society gets mediocre medical care, or none at all. At least in Lakeland everyone gets decent care. But if you want immunotherapy for cancer, or even less critical modern drugs that make life much more comfortable, you are out of luck, so this is not cost free. On the other hand, today's medicine, as wonderful as it is when it helps us in ways impossible in the past, is not making anything but incremental advances, and is powerless to extend our lifespan substantially, or to prevent the deaths caused by our own

bad behavior, as in obesity, or by the bad behavior of our rotten ruling class, as in the tremendously destructive lockdowns ordered by those cretins, resulting in far more lost years due to deaths of despair than to the Wuhan Plague itself. I'd say modern medicine, as a package with modernity, is a tradeoff with pluses and minuses.

While I dispute the mechanisms, I pretty much agree with Greer's predictions for the future of America on its current path, and with what he shows of America outside Lakeland. I think more autarky would no doubt be an excellent idea. The nub of the disagreement between Greer and me is whether a future post-liberal society, i.e., Lakeland, should reject technological progress. Traditionalism or futurism? I am firmly in the futurist camp. I think mankind's reaching for new frontiers, most of all Space, is essential to realize a decent future, as I have discussed at great length elsewhere. And technological progress is necessary to accomplish this.

Lakeland is a system in equilibrium. But paradoxically, such a social system is not stable. I think it very doubtful such a system can ast on any larger scale than a village. Or rather no worthwhile culture—Egypt stood still for four thousand years; China has stood still, though not quite as still, for more than two thousand, in terms of any actual technological or cultural advancement. What shows Greer wrong, most of all, is that Lakeland's model, 1940, was not in the least stagnant—great things were being accomplished, though the seeds of our cultural destruction are also obvious in retrospect. Rebuilding the appearance of that society while forbidding accomplishment is cargo cult.

Greer seems to agree, when he says "if you've gone down a blind alley, the only way you can go forward starts by backing up." I've said much the same thing, in criticism of what is today viewed as Burkean conservatism—but the problem is that Greer doesn't actually want to go forward. He thinks, rather, that we can and should, stand still, after a period of mining the past. Lakeland rejects Space, most of all, as a useless and destructive distraction, because of Greer's false theories about technology. Lakeland is therefore a fly in amber. It is portrayed as vibrant, mostly by stating, not showing, that it is vibrant, but if so, it is the vibrancy of vampirism, ripped from history and held up as a live culture, which it is not. Greer doesn't show any path forward, because

without technological progress, there can be no forward movement. He ignores this problem.

It is only accomplishment that dispels spiritual ennui. The effect on society is an intangible, often denied by materialists today, but it is obvious if you look at history. And most or all non-technological accomplishments have all been accomplished, meaning if we are not to dissolve into a puddle, technological accomplishment is our future. The key is that not all new technology is accomplishment—meaning an advancement of the human condition and situation, that is in some degree outward-facing, not focused on increasing our own safety and comfort. Dark Sky, Tesla, Facebook, Amazon—none of those are accomplishment. If I were to write my own *Retrotopia*, therefore, it would feature all the core social practices of the 1940s—among them, an obsessive focus on honoring and rewarding forward technological progress. Yes, we have to go backward first, a process which hopefully will be brought to us in 2021, so that 2041 can be awesome.