

EDITORIAL NOTEBOOK

The Perils of Progress

By EDUARDO PORTER
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I was studying physics in college 20 years ago this month, when two chemists at the University of Utah promised that they could unleash the energy of the sun in a test tube at room temperature, and meet the entire world's energy needs forever with some cooked up water and a couple of electrodes.

The exhilaration at the genesis of the new science of "cold fusion" faded fairly quickly. Scores of scientists around the world tried and failed to replicate the Utah scientists' wondrous results. Irsksome physicists pointed out that the process the chemists described violated several laws of nature.

To me, however, those heady few months bring to mind something more than the hubristic enthusiasm of some overheated men in lab coats. The experience provides a lasting lesson about our faith in technology as the solution to our challenges, and the cover it provides to avoid hard choices on things like, say, conserving energy. It's a warning about the pitfalls of our unshakeable belief in the limitless promise of our endeavors, regardless of reality's constraints. It is a lesson about the dangers of our love affair with progress.

This breed of delusion is ubiquitous across American history. In the 1990s it laid the ground from which Pets.com, Kozmo.com and Webvan sprang up to revolutionize capitalism, until they didn't. It can be found in the trust placed in Bernard Madoff and his unfathomable perpetual 11 percent-plus rate of return. Most damaging, it nurtured the belief that home prices would rise forever.

Contemplating the economic rubble from our most recent paroxysm of enthusiasm, I wonder whether we should do something about our blind passions. I've heard the supporting arguments, of course, about how optimism seeds the American Dream, nurturing the entrepreneurial zeal that supports the nation's prosperity. And it's true that the Internet bubble bequeathed us the Internet as we know it. I'm told optimism also helps patients recover from coronary bypass surgery.

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Still, I can't help thinking that repackaging the future as a basketful of promise is a con. Recent research from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has found that the son of a poor American father has more than a 40 percent chance of being poor himself — higher odds than in, say, Britain, Norway or Denmark. The income of the typical American household was lower in 2007 than it was in 1999. This aspect of the American Dream seems like a dream only.

I am confident that we shall keep on dreaming, however, regardless of the damage this periodically inflicts. On the anniversary of the “discovery” in Utah 20 years ago, a Navy chemist breathlessly announced to a meeting of the American Chemical Society in Salt Lake City that her lab had nailed it, finally, finding “significant” evidence of cold fusion. Now they call the phenomenon a “low-energy nuclear reaction,” presumably to overcome the stigma. *EDUARDO PORTER*