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Review: Made To Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America

By Giles Slade

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Giles Slade. *Made To Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. 330 pp. ISBN: 0-674-02203-3 (hardcover); US\$27.95.

"Will America's pyramids be pyramids of waste?" (p. 7). *Made To Break* explores America's troubling technological waste problem, particularly e-wastes with their high levels of permanent biological toxins (PBTs) from arsenic to beryllium, cadmium, and others. This book concerns technological innovations and obsolescence in all its various forms-technological, psychological, and planned. Planned obsolescence is defined as an "assortment of techniques used to artificially limit the durability of a manufactured good in order to stimulate repetitive consumption" (p. 5). Slade provides a 20th century historical background to explain how we have reached the point of producing an endless volume of e-waste products, from cheap throwaway calculators to continuously upgraded cell phones. A lot of background material is provided on the frenetic pace of computer development and obsolescence, with a focus on microchips, word processing, and video games.

Planned obsolescence, also called death dating, of products and goods is a uniquely American invention that permeates many aspects of our lives. For example, the automobile industry discovered early on that consumers were willing to trade up for style, a discovery that led to the annual model change. Even national defense is not immune to the lure of continual production and rapid-upgrades of weapon systems. Slade supports this assertion concerning weapons upgrading with some fascinating accounts of espionage and deception in the international arms trade business.

As American manufacturers learned how to exploit obsolescence, consumers increasingly came to accept it. The book shows how repetitive consumption is tied in with advertising, packaging and branding. The notions of "new and improved" and "the next best thing" are incorporated as techniques used to get

good products to go out of style and be discarded. Other techniques artificially limit the durability of manufactured goods as a means of stimulating consumption. Rather than build a product that lasts a long time, manufacturers shorten product life spans on purpose to create more sales and counter overproduction. Product obsolescence became part of the nation's promotion of progress and change which, in turn, stimulated the economy, becoming for many a way to make money.

Made to Break is not an environmental indictment of society's waste or a laundry list of what to do about e-wastes. Rather, it presents facts concerning e-wastes and allows readers to draw their own conclusions. Slade does, however, conclude that manufacturers will have to modify their practices and suggests that design strategies should "include not just planned obsolescence but planned disassembly and reuse as part of the product life cycle" (p. 281).

Slade, an independent scholar and freelance writer, continues many of the ideas put forth by economist Thorstein Veblen (conspicuous consumption), journalist and social critic Vance Packard (subliminal consumption), and others. The text is referenced and has a subject index. The historical accounts alone make the book worth reading. Recommended.

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