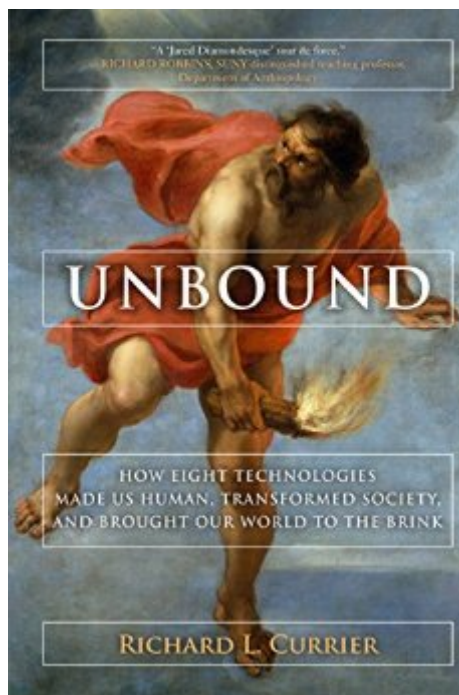


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Unbound: How Eight Technologies Made Us Human, Transformed Society, And Brought Our World To The Brink



Synopsis

Although we usually think of technology as something unique to modern times, our ancestors began to create the first technologies millions of years ago in the form of prehistoric tools and weapons. Over time, eight key technologies gradually freed us from the limitations of our animal origins. The fabrication of weapons, the mastery of fire, and the technologies of clothing and shelter radically restructured the human body, enabling us to walk upright, shed our body hair, and migrate out of tropical Africa. Symbolic communication transformed human evolution from a slow biological process into a fast cultural process. The invention of agriculture revolutionized the relationship between humanity and the environment, and the technologies of interaction led to the birth of civilization. Precision machinery spawned the industrial revolution and the rise of nation-states; and in the next metamorphosis, digital technologies may well unite all of humanity for the benefit of future generations. Synthesizing the findings of primatology, paleontology, archeology, history, and anthropology, Richard Carrier reinterprets and retells the modern narrative of human evolution that began with the discovery of Lucy and other Australopithecus fossils. But the same forces that allowed us to integrate technology into every aspect of our daily lives have also brought us to the brink of planetary catastrophe. Unbound explains both how we got here and how human society must be transformed again to achieve a sustainable future. Technology: The deliberate modification of any natural object or substance with forethought to achieve a specific end or to serve a specific purpose. •

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Customer Reviews

Unbound combines the best of a lifetime of discriminating, multi-disciplinary scholarship with the storytelling abilities of great scholarly, humanistic writers like Desmond Morris, Carl Sagan, and historian James McPherson. Dr. Currier's highly accessible work is alive with the energy of discovery. Synthesizing insights from paleontology, primatology, cultural anthropology, and related sciences it surprises and challenges accepted narratives of human evolution. In the process, it not only conveys a new understanding of our profound and ancient connections; it also illuminates key facets of modern society. Highly recommended for all serious students of human culture and the humanities--and for any reader who wants a greater sense of place at a time when understanding how we function as a species has never been more urgently needed.

Loving to read a good book of any kind, I so often find that reading non-fiction can be a tedious labor, with the book's author approaching a single subject from a hundred different angles, to create a book from what could have been discussed in a chapter. Not so with Unbound! With ten chapters, eight technologies and five million years of history on earth as a subject matter, this book is as enjoyable to read as it is full of information on the evolution of humanity and technology from pre-history until today. I will tell you right up front, I know Richard Currier, the author, and I was one of the people he trusted with reading Unbound in its very early stages. So I had the opportunity to read a draft of the manuscript awhile ago, but only piecemeal and not necessarily in the correct order of chapters or copy. Even at that, it read well and I was looking forward to getting the book. Having recently received my pre-ordered copy from , I had the opportunity to read the the book in its entirety. Wow! I was hooked from the introduction, but found that as reading the chapters progressed, I didn't want to put the book down. I love when that happens! By the end of chapter ten, I was sorry I had gone through it so fast... I didn't want it to end. I am sure that people with deep interest in anthropology, paleontology, technology, history and early history are going to gravitate to Unbound. I see the book has received praise from professors and professionals in those fields. As a lover of learning, I enjoyed the opportunity to gain more knowledge on those subjects. The book is written in the style of a storyteller, not a technician, making it a great read for all.

This book falls very much into the category of man-against-nature, "progress" narratives about human history, and is largely typical of that genre, extending our technological genius all the way back to the australopithecines. There are some peculiarities, however, that call into question the author's credentials and judgment. For example, at the outset, the author implies that hunter-gatherer groups are totally hierarchical, when as an anthropologist he well knows (or should know) that there is a tremendous amount of research into hunter-gatherer groups showing they are basically egalitarian (see Chris Boehm's 1999 book for example). Presumably he omits this because humans transitioning from egalitarian to hierarchical societies doesn't fit his overall narrative of ever-expanding human liberty thanks to the advance of technology. There are several points toward the end of the book where the author does begin to admit some of the darker effects of technology, when he laments the "demise of traditional values" (p239) and the fact that women have sadly lost their place in the home ("the very labor-saving devices that modern people have acquired to make women's work lighter and easier have had the effect of depriving women of the indispensable position they formerly enjoyed in their relationships with men and in society in general" (p230)) , but he goes on to reassure us that we can overcome any problem. And incredibly, he argues that dumping CO2 into the atmosphere, far from being a bad thing, is actually *helping* by preventing the real danger---another ice age. As a student of both anthropology and physics, I found the book lacking and do not recommend it.

While the title doesn't exactly make you want to grab it and burn though the text, this is a fascinating book. Starting with the early hominids (ok, no longer technically correct) Carrier deftly illustrates the effect of various technologies on humanity. Sure the obvious ones are included like the agricultural revolution, but others are equally, if not more profound, such as the very use of tools. Carrier explains his reasoning and this is where the book excels. As an example, tool use at the very beginning of our existence gave our predecessor species a critical calorie acquiring and predator defeating advantage. So much so we rose from knuckle dusters to full bipeds in a very short (evolutionary speaking) timespan. The author ties this in with observation of chimp behavior to illustrate how small but critical the step was. While the reader might disagree at some of Carrier's technology choices, one can easily see the profound effects. If you're curious how we got to where we are now, this is a book well worth your time.

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