

ORGANIC LIVING

By

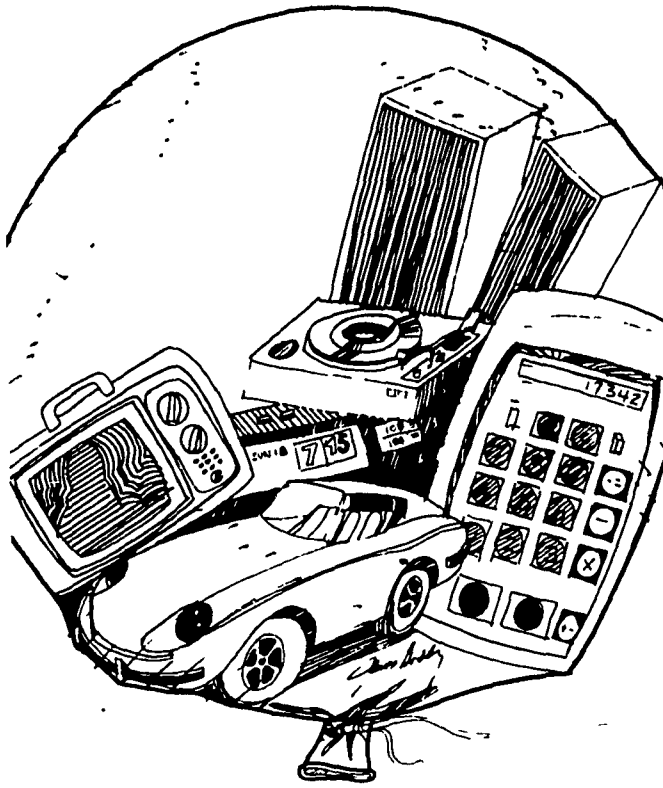
Robert Rodale

Soon you will be able to buy butter that spreads easily even when cold. The technology for that new-product advance has been perfected. Cows will be fed special foods, changing the character of their milk so it can be made into cold-spreading butter. All that remains is for the practical application of the technique to be worked out.

Already, you can buy commercial chickens that have a golden-yellow color, just like the farmyard chickens of generations ago that used to scratch for wild foods that gave their flesh a deep, healthy pigment. Advertisements for these new yellow chickens claim that the color is natural — from narigold petals added to their rations.

Neither one of these changed foods is harmful to our health, and possibly the added cost of these changes is reasonable enough to allow such modified products to fit easily into the family budget. Yet frivolous technological improvements — like butter that spreads when cold — are deeply disturbing to some observers of the way our lives have been changed by progress. They are symbolic of our inability to see progress is anything other than increased material prosperity in all areas.

Bernard Levin, a columnist for the London Times, views cold-spreading butter and similar inventions as a positive threat to the survival of society as we know it. "If our society cannot stop itself spending its labour and its treasure on



devising methods of spreading cold butter, it will not long survive, nor long deserve to," he says.

The main problem, says Levin, is our inability to draw a line and say that progress in certain areas has reached reasonable limits. The idea of easy living is like a balloon that can expand indefinitely. Even if everyone would have several refrigerators, each filled with a couple of hundred pounds of perpetually soft butter, people would still want more "prosperity." At least, that's Levin's view, and he makes a good deal of sense.

Of course, the immediate outlook is for a decline in material prosperity, forced on us by the energy situation and rampant inflation. But even though many people are tightening their belts and cutting back their travel plans, those measures are generally viewed as temporary setbacks. Someday, the popular view holds, nuclear energy or oil from shale will again give us the power to boost our physical standards of living onward and upward.

Evidence of our inability to steer our efforts at improving prosperity into logical channels abounds. Probably every American is now using a dozen products that symbolize our mixed-up objectives as much as cold-spreading butter. Here are a few examples to ponder:

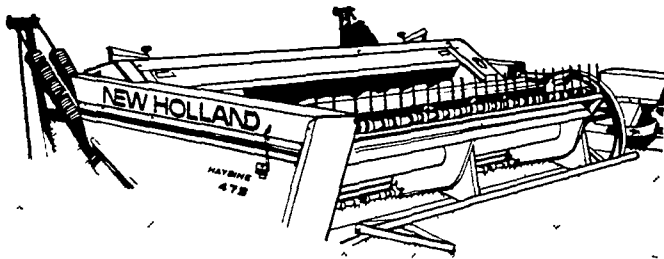
Instant-on TV sets. You may not have realized that many TV's that turn on instantly in fact have power running through some circuits all the time. So to get the convenience of immediate entertainment, you are consuming power when nothing is happening. (That's not true, incidentally, of solid-state TV's. They can be turned off completely.)

Four-channel stereo draws current only when turned on, but is it a truly meaningful advance, worth the extra cost and the purchase of new records and tapes? Has anyone thought of defining reasonable limits for high fidelity sound reproduction, or are there no limits?

American autos are replete with borderline "improvements." Automatic speed controls take the pressure off our right foot. Antennas rise from the fender automatically when the radio is turned on. Windows open or close at the touch of a finger. All these things make life easier, but do we

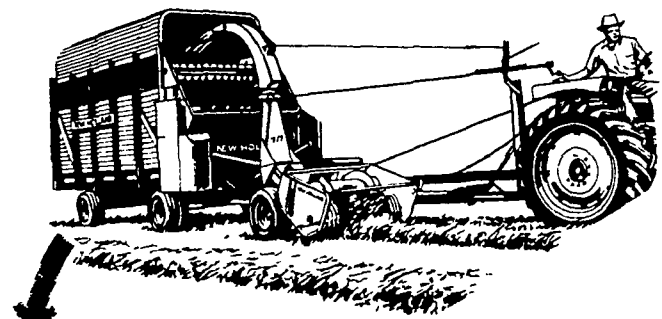
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really need that ease? Does it warp our sense of values? Food and drugs are ripe with similar examples. Striped toothpaste blends in mouthwash. Peanut butter and jelly is layered in jars in the same way, saving a few arm movements each day. Aspirins are made to dissolve in eight hours instead of four, for the sake of convenience.

Packaging is another fertile field for study. Throw-away bottles are a national habit, while glass for canning jars is in short supply. Pop-top beer and soda cans have hooked a whole generation, while their discarded tabs cut bare feet on beaches and litter the landscape. Cheese is sold sliced, with each slice individually wrapped in plastic.

There are other examples. New electric thermometers show both indoor and outdoor temperature in digital numerals, saving us the trouble of peering at a dial. And over the horizon looms the supersonic transport, promising to take us anywhere in the world twice as fast as old-fashioned jets — while using more fuel per mile.

I am not against progress, and I admit that all these things that seem to me slightly silly or needless do represent progress of a kind. That is why most people accept such changes readily, and are willing to pay for them.

But this question remains: Have we retained our ability to tell the difference between progress that makes life better in meaningful ways, and what I call pseudo-progress — which uses gimmickry to lull us into thinking that we need slight improvements in traditional products that have served us well in the past?

Find out more about how technology can sometimes backfire, in the 48-page booklet, "Hot-Line to Health." To get your copy of this inside report on man-made hazards that affect us all, send fifty cents to Robert Rodale, Organic Living, in care of this newspaper. Be sure to ask for the booklet by name, and please allow at least three weeks for delivery.

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