

Olive spoons and terrapin forks

Charles Day

My wife and I live five blocks south of H Street, a revitalized commercial strip in northeast Washington, DC. The first signs of redevelopment took the form of new restaurants, bars, and apartment buildings. Next came a streetcar line. Soon H Street will boast a Whole Foods store.

As a keen cook, I look forward to the new grocery. Whenever I walk my dog past it, I check for progress. One dark early morning I spotted something unusual in the apron of flagstones outside Anthology, an oddly named new apartment building across from Whole Foods: white LED lights set between the stones.

At first I marveled at the twinkling decoration. Then a second, more sobering thought occurred to me. In 2014 the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics to Isamu Akasaki, Hiroshi Amano, and Shuji Nakamura “for the invention of efficient blue light-emitting diodes, which has enabled bright and energy-saving white light sources.” Yes, LEDs will save energy if they replace incandescent light-bulbs. But if the uses of LEDs proliferate beyond those of traditional incandescents, the savings could be lost.

A similar loss of savings could occur if carbon-based composites become cheap enough for widespread use in cars. Lighter cars use less fuel. But car companies could decide to exploit the new material to make cars bigger rather than more efficient.

The cancelling out of technological efficiency by commercial priorities has happened before. In 18th-century Britain, flatware was made from silver. Only the rich could afford to buy full sets of knives, forks, and spoons and to employ servants to keep them polished. By the mid 19th century, cutlery had figured out how to mass-produce silver-plated flatware from mild steel. Because the new flatware was cheaper, middle-class households could buy it. To boost profits, cutlery marketed new implements of befuddling variety, such as fish knives, cheese scoops, olive spoons, terrapin forks, oyster prongs, chocolate muddlers, gelatin knives—to borrow a list from Bill Bryson’s book



At Home: A Short History of Private Life (Doubleday, 2010).

What lessons do the olive spoon and terrapin fork have for us in the 21st century? First, they can prod us to examine the notion of technological progress. Advances in metallurgy led to advances in cutlery production, which led to super-specialized flatware. Is that progress? The so-called Internet of Things promises what benefits exactly? A “smart” milk carton that can alert your “smart” fridge, which can, in turn, alert your cell phone that the milk is about to sour?

A second lesson concerns economics. By selling bigger, more diverse sets of flatware, 19th-century cutlery firms could employ more people. Their customers bought the implements under no more persuasion than advertising wields. No doubt the owners of terrapin forks enjoyed showing them off at dinner parties. A triumph for capitalism!

I side with free-market economists on the matter of whether the government should tell companies what goods and services to sell to consumers. Except in times of national peril, it shouldn’t. Still, installing LED lights in sidewalks and manufacturing terrapin forks seems wasteful.

The extent to which humankind should husband Earth’s natural resources is debatable. Pessimistic ecologists point to shrinking rainforests and dwindling freshwater supplies. Optimistic economists point to market forces: If a resource becomes too scarce, its price shoots up, and cheaper substitutes will inevitably be found. Besides, precious resources such as erbium and the other rare earths don’t disappear when we use them to make electronic devices. Recycling them might be expensive, but they remain available.

Regardless of how the debate is resolved, I won’t be buying any olive spoons or terrapin forks.



A SET OF 19TH-CENTURY TERRAPIN FORKS made by Gorham in its Egypt-inspired Isis pattern. (Image courtesy of Antique Cupboard, Big Bend, Wisconsin.)