The management scientist is anti-political because politics thwarts the rationality of his designs.

Mr. George L. Yaney has written a brilliantly original, thoughtful, provocative and yet ultimately rather frustrating book. Based on a prodigious amount of reading, abounding in flashes of insight, it marks a new departure in studies of Imperial Russia and therefore deserves to be examined at length here.

Hitherto most historians have been content to view the relationship between government and society in much the same terms as it was seen by contemporaries: that is to say, as a struggle between the forces of "progress" and "reaction," with liberals and revolutionaries ranged against conservative bureaucrats. Even those who have regarded sympathetically the efforts of the tsars' officials to cope with the manifold obstacles that beset them have hailed the positive role played by the reformers who worked towards the introduction of regularity and legality in public affairs and have decried those elements who sought above all else to uphold the autocratic prerogative or the security of the state. The conventional wisdom may be summed up as follows: although some progress was made during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries towards introduction of the rule of law, elements of arbitrariness remained inherent in the tsarist system until it finally collapsed in 1917. Most Western liberals and Soviet Marxists, however greatly they might differ in points of emphasis, would concur in this broad judgment.

From this consensus Mr. Yaney forcefully dissents. The emperor's personal power, he argues, was a necessary element in bridging the gulf between the urban élite and the peasant masses. "The autocratic tsar," he writes, "was not only a symbol but also a practical basis for making and enforcing vital government decisions.... System grew up under the aegis of the tsar image and remained dependent on it" (p. 388).

This is no old-fashioned monarchist's apologia for personal rule. On the contrary, Mr. Yaney speaks in the language of social science. His terminology is that in vogue among practitioners of systems analysis, or "operations research" as it used to be called. His approach presents a powerful challenge to traditional modes of historical

inquiry—the first shot in a battle that may well continue for years. The publishers (who incidentally have served their author well) claim that “Russian eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history will never be the same again. Every subsequent study will have to deal with a whole new range of questions that Yaney has asked for the first time.” They may be right. This is very much a pioneering venture, with great merits but also inescapable weaknesses. Explaining his methodology, Mr. Yaney admits with disarming frankness that his arguments cannot always be substantiated by evidence that would satisfy the canons of orthodox historical scholarship and pleads for “acts of imagination”; characteristically, he at once takes the offensive against potential critics by asserting: “Studies based on ‘valid’ evidence assume that the men who wrote the documents actually understood the connection between what they were doing and what they thought they were doing, and this, too, demands an act of imagination” (pp. xv-xvi). Positivists and rationalists, be forewarned: metaphysics is once more on the march!

Are men capable of formulating their “true” objectives, and their friends or enemies capable of assessing them? Should men’s thoughts and actions be viewed through the prism of the age in which they lived? Historians not afraid of being labelled conventional will probably reply in the affirmative: the investigator’s task is to reconcile the conflicting contemporary evidence and to reconstruct the situation as it existed at the time with as much care and objectivity as can be mustered. To be sure, imagination is involved too, as are the new insights gained from subsequent experience or from other disciplines. But undue modernization is to be avoided, lest it lead the inquirer to impose his own design on the past or to argue that the ultimate reality is as he sees it, rather than what actually existed; since this reality is in any case unknowable, hubris is to be shunned like an occupational disease.

Mr. Yaney has not, alas, entirely escaped these temptations. After all, no Russian ruler or statesmen ever said in so many words that he was seeking to impose “system” upon the nation: for it is only in our own day that men have conceived of government in such mechanistic terms. Lacking direct contemporary evidence, the modern historian-cum-social-scientist is impelled to uncover problems and programs unknown to the personages of whom he writes. It might be objected that all historians face this difficulty to some degree: for example, a student of the economic affairs of the Roman empire might seek to establish the GNP, even though such a concept was unknown to the ancients. Nevertheless he would normally indicate the point at which the evidence of his sources stops and his own work of analysis and speculation begins.

There are moments (e.g., pp. xvi, 50) when Mr. Yaney seems to be intimidated by his own boldness and assures us that he is offering only an alternative way of looking at history; but at many other points he leaves us in no doubt that he feels a healthy scorn for those humdrum individuals who persist in seeing Russia’s institutional or social history in political terms, as a struggle between individuals or groups of men with competing ideas and interests. Yet logically there seems no reason why the two approaches should not be combined.

The grand design which Mr. Yaney detects in Imperial Russian society is the slow emergence of “legal-administrative system”—that is to say, of the habit of coordinated action consciously directed towards major change. Or, in his own words,