

# The Refusal of Technology

John Zerzan

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*FE Introduction:* Members of the *Fifth Estate* staff and our friends (as well as some not so friendly) have been debating the role of technology and its function within the larger system of domination almost since the inception of our tenure with this paper. At that time we were greatly influenced by the writings of the French Situationists and giddily shared their utopian dreams of cities on tracks that could be wheeled to the seashore each day and similar exotic visions of what a “liberated” technology could bring.

However, we increasingly came to see technology as that which constantly stands in opposition to our desires for a truly human community, one unmediated and non-coordinated.

We have long desired a full discussion and investigation of the technology issue which comes to grips with all of the questions implied: Are technology and capital synonymous? Can there be sophisticated technology without centralized political control? Are machines inherently alienating?, etc.

We have opened up some of these questions in past issues of this paper, particularly in the introductions to Marshall Sahlin’s “The Original Affluent Society,” (FE #298, June 19, 1979) and to “Technology & the State” (FE #290, March 2, 1978). The response to both of these admittedly skeletal critiques of an enormous subject provided little more than critics tweaking us about wanting to return to the caves of our paleolithic forebears, all the while retaining typewriters and bicycles.

We had hoped for more since the issue of technology ultimately frames the context of the modern economy and the state and is a subject which demands rigorous debate and clarification. The following piece, while in no manner pretending to exhaust our views on the subject, throws out a challenge to those who would see a future for the technology of this society. We would like your comments.

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“Of course everybody had to be given a personal code! How else could government do right by its citizens, keep track of the desires, tastes, preferences, purchases, commitments and above all location of a continent full of mobile, free individuals?”

“So don’t dismiss the computer as a new type of fetters. Think of it rationally, as the most liberating device ever invented, the only tool capable of serving the multifarious needs of modern man.

“Think of it, for a change, as him.”

—John Brunner, *The Shockwave Rider*

Upon the utter destruction of wage-labor and the commodity, a new life will be situated and redefined, by the moment, in countless, unimagined forms. Launched by the abolition of every trace of authority and signified by the delights and surprises of an infinity of gift-creations, freely, spontaneously expressed by everyone.

Concepts like “economy,” “exchange,” “production” will have no meaning. (What is worth preserving from this lunatic order?) Perhaps mobile celebrations will replace our sense of cities, maybe even language will be obsolete.

But there are those who see revolutionary transformation in rather a different light; for them the Brunner quote is, tragically, not much of a burlesque. Consider—if your stomach is strong— the following, from a 1980 ultra-leftist flyer, typical of the high-tech approach to the revolutionary question:

“The development of computer technologies, now a threat to our job security, could be used to develop a network of global communications. In this way, our needs can be directly coordinated with the available labor-power and raw materials.”

Leaving aside the pro-wage-labor concern for our job security, we find human activity (electronically) treated as so much “available labor-power.” Is this the language of desire? Could freedom, love and play flourish along such lines?

This computerized prescription is filled by taking “control of the global social reproduction network...” Capitalism, it need hardly be added, can be defined with some precision as the global social reproduction network.

Looking at the foundations of “advanced” technology—which our ultra-leftists, in their instrumentalism, always wish to ignore—even the most visionary of intentions would flounder. High-tech as a vehicle, far from aiding a qualitative regeneration, denies the possibility of visionary development. The “great height now made possible” by computers and the like is, alas, only an expression of the perverse logic of historic class rule.

Technology has not developed neutrally, as if in the right hands it could benignly transform reality into something importantly different. The means and methods of social reproduction are necessarily in keeping with the stability of a social order. The factory system expressed the need for a disciplined proletariat; more modern modes progressively extend this “civilizing” process via specialized, usually centralized, technologies. The individual is everywhere reduced by the instruments of capitalism, as surely as by its wage-labor/commodity essence.

The purveyors of “alternative technology,” it should be noted, promote a different illusion. This illusion lies in ideologizing fragments of possibly acceptable technology while ignoring that which will shape all of the future, class struggles.

Simple techniques for growing a huge amount of food in a few hours per year, for instance, are fraught with extremely significant implications; they present, in fact, some of the practical possibilities of living life exquisitely—as in a garden. But they can become real only if linked to the gigantic, necessary destruction of a world which impedes every utopian project.

Cioran asks, “If ‘progress’ is so great an evil, how is it that we do nothing to free ourselves from it without further delay?” In fact, this “freeing” is well underway, as seen in the massive “turn-off” felt toward its continuance.

General Dynamics vice-president Veliotis gave vent to a bitter ruling class frustration of the subject (summer 1980):

“I, for one, would be delighted if our vocational schools would bring us graduates who, if not trained, were simply trainable who could understand basic manufacturing processes, who could do shop math, who could use standard tools and gauges.”

More fundamental yet is a growing refusal to participate in education at all, given its direct linkage to “progress.” The drop-out rate in NYC high-schools is now over 50%. The drop-out rate for all California high schools has risen from 12% in 1970 to 22% in 1980, occasioning predictions of “angry future workers and high juvenile crime rates.”

The relationship between technology and education is also apt for the reason that the latter provides, in its progression, such a useful, if obvious, analogy to the former. The fragmentation of knowledge into separate, artificially constructed fields constitutes the modern university—and social intelligence in general—in its ridiculous

division of labor. This is the perfect analog to technology itself; rather, it is more, inasmuch as both clearly work in tandem toward the ever-shrunken individual, dominated by a contrived, fractionalized scale of “information.” The ignorance-thus engendered and enforced reminds us of Khayati’s allusion to the university: “Everything is said about our society except what it is.”

Government thinker Willis Harman writes of the coming “information society,” based on “revolutionizing everyday life with microcomputers.” A horrible history surfaces with these words, as well as a forewarning of our future as cast by all similar techno-junkies, benevolent and otherwise.

Finally we return to the personal, which is of course the real terrain of the revolutionary axis. A character in Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* wonders:

“And what is ‘common’ about the ‘common life?’ What if [we] were to do with ‘common life’ what Einstein did with matter? Finding its energetics, uncovering its radiance.”

The radiance and energetics will be there when we are all that “Einstein”: when every productivist, standardized separation—and every other mediation (“coordinated” or not)—is destroyed by us forever.

Everything in the past and present is waiting, waiting to detonate.

## **Related**

See responses in “FE Readers Debate Technology,” FE #304, December 31, 1980.



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