

FE Readers Debate Technology

Fifth Estate Collective
Various Authors

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The letters on this page are responses to John Zerzan's "The Refusal of Technology" which appeared in the October 20, 1980 edition [#303] of the Fifth Estate; below are our comments on the question. In the article, Zerzan accuses those whose vision of revolution contains a dependence upon "advanced" technology as not significantly breaking with the world as it is. We have edited each of the contributions for purposes of space and we can only hope that we have left intact the authors' intent.

The response from the Union of Concerned Commies also contained a critique of Zerzan's political perspectives which was omitted and we did not reproduce their leaflet as they requested. The entire letter and the leaflet are available from the UCC, Box 1200, 2000 Center St., Berkeley CA 94704.

1. "Technology is the horror of our political structure."

To the Fifth Estate:

In his article "The Refusal of Technology," John Zerzan outlines the institution of technology into various aspects of social life. What he is describing is the fundamental political structure of the modern state, technocracy.

Beyond the simple definition of monopoly capitalism, the technocratic state is based on a centralized and highly specialized bureaucracy and ruled by a managerial elite responsible for consolidating the power of the corporate structure. Technocracy is the realization of a nineteenth century bourgeois utopia whereby society would function as a machine and would be administered as such. That vision of the future is today's fascist nightmare not tomorrow's dream.

It is destructive to formulate a new world out of the cataclysm of revolution that attempts to eliminate the values and functions of technocracy (starvation, exploitation, imperialism, centralization, ideology and authority) and still maintain the system of technocracy as an ideal. Humanity cannot be injected into a machine.

The assumption behind this undying faith in technology (both as a possible revolutionary force and as a neutral historical manifestation) can be illustrated by the contention that within the present order of society humans are enslaved by unrestrained technology and that revolution would invert that relationship. Revolution would force technology to serve people and we would be free from centralization, authority and alienation of technology.

However this absurd paradox is simply a description of our present condition. Technology isn't an unrestrained horror; it is the horror of our political structure controlled by a small elite serving the interests of the corporate state. The illusion of human technology as a neutral object detached from social structures and struggles does nothing but integrate the desire for total revolution with the ideological rationale of the decaying order.

Look around! We are machines! There is no distinction between the values, functions and history of humans and those of technology. Mechanization, automation and computerization are not simply aspects or de-

scriptions of our behavior, but represent our social condition. Within modern society, learning, working, playing have no value or meaning outside the totality of the system and evolution of technology.

Modern technology has alienated us in totality and therefore it is no longer simply our alienated labor we seek to regain through revolution but our entire collective existence, our work, our play and thoughts. Those authentic human values and relationships that exist in our society, do so in spite of our alienated condition. These personal subjective experiences remain the promise of a human future.

It is the civilization of technology that modern revolution seeks to destroy if it is to be revolution at all. Historical materialism, class and human labor have become the framework through which we view and gauge everything. Revolution within this framework has served to perpetuate the civilization of technology and thus cannot be the revolutionary foundation for liberating a technocratic society.

Historical materialism of class and the science of revolution like all science should be discarded as the controlled method of object problem solving which is the very nature of technology. Modern revolution must go beyond the confines of science and technology just as freedom, love and desire go beyond the liberation of social labor and class necessity.

We must forge revolution out of our own experience and not out of an abstract scientific doctrine. Revolution can no longer be a historical mechanism of class struggles within the evolution of technology. It is precisely the civilization of technology which is the basis of all material relations, the condition we seek to liberate ourselves from...

Paul Hetznecker
Amherst, Mass.

2. “Machines don’t shackle me... the ruling order does.”

Dear People:

New technology, specifically mechanization’s displacement of working people, will, in my opinion, be the primary factor that will set up the necessary material preconditions for radical change in the land of milk and honey. Fewer people working, fewer consumers.

I believe technology may turn out to be liberatory not so much because it will help speed up the collapse of present society, but “after the revolution” it will allow people more free time for the joy of creation. Machines don’t shackle me, the foreman and the ruling order he is a part of does. A self-managed society won’t simply inherit the productive apparatus nor the pseudo needs and wants of present indirect democracy.

Some technology will be discarded during the transition to a sane society and without the spectre of profit, remaining technology won’t necessarily be authoritarian, even if centralized.

If humanity can’t manage certain aspects of society on a centralized basis without being authoritarian in the process, there will be little long distance travel which would be reductionist. A Detroitier would have to walk to Florida to experience the taste of a banana.

In regards to mediation, when you get right down to it this piece of paper and the pencil in my hand mediate this experience between me and you, but more importantly, it serves to communicate. So, I’d say even the boob tube is not absolutely evil as Jerry Mander (See *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*) would have us believe; it’s the ideology espoused that is twisted.

Here is a quote from Raoul Vaneigem’s *The Revolution of Everyday Life* that sums it up: “As soon as mediation escapes my control, every step I take drags me towards something foreign and inhuman. Engels painstakingly showed that a stone, a fragment of nature alien to man, became human as soon as it became an extension of the hand by serving as a tool (and the stone in its turn humanized the hand of the hominid). But once it is appropriated by a master, an employer, a ministry of planning, a management, the tool’s meaning is changed; it deflects the action of its user towards other purposes. And what is true of tools is true for all mediations.”

John’s critique of technology parallels the mistaken assumption that guns kill when in fact adverse economic conditions do. I suppose we could turn all the factories into dance halls but then the citizens’ militia would have to learn to use crowd control tactics. You know, to curtail food riots.

Rage & Love
Mark
Monroe

3. “Instantaneous, direct communication would allow co-ordinating projects.”

Dear Fifth Estate

Agreeing wholeheartedly with the first two paragraphs of John Zerzan’s “Refusal of Technology” (hereafter “RoT”), (FE, Oct. 20, 1980), we feel an all-too-familiar dismay at his descent into facile slander and willful misinterpretation. We authored the Innervoice from which he quotes one paragraph—out of context. Hopefully, FE is printing our leaflet in full alongside our response, so readers can make up their own minds if we are “pro-wage-labor,” or if we advocate a computerized, technocratic solution to the ills of modern society. Numerous other phrases quoted in Zerzan’s article are not ours, though the absence of references for the quotes may lead one to think they all come from the same text.

Although the ideology Zerzan brands us with on the basis of our use of the term “labor-power” is obviously not ours (a central theme of the leaflet concerns the abolition of wage-labor), we recognize that this was an incorrect usage of the term.

To clarify, what we referred to was the possibilities which instantaneous, direct communication would allow in coordinating collective projects. If we assume a society of freely associated individuals, in which people will be willing to devote a part of their creative faculties towards satisfying the needs and desires of a community to which they belong-and will derive pleasure from an act of giving free of compulsion and not tied to exchange-then there will have to be a way in which people can find out what others’ needs, desires, and creative capacities are.

In our opinion, the greater the range of this communication, the greater the diversity of human experience. Communication and information technologies existing today could, we believe, facilitate these tasks enormously. Sophisticated communication technologies would also facilitate the process of transferring raw materials from places where they abound to areas of scarcity-depending, of course, on the willingness of people to extract, transport, etc.

Our vision of a free society is predicated on the immediate abolition of wage-labor, commodity production, and hierarchical forms of organization. But the physiological exertion of human energy directed towards the creation of material objects will still go on. Some part of this activity will involve manipulation of tools for various and sundry purposes (i.e. “technology”).

No doubt the forms of technology currently in use will have to be carefully evaluated in the broad context of new social relations and a fragile ecosphere inherited from the irrational capitalist order. In particular, there are certain technologies which are inherently dangerous (nuclear energy and petrochemical for example) and others whose application is designed primarily to centralize power and divest producers from control or creative participation in the production process. These will have to be discarded in favor of new methods befitting a society guided by direct satisfaction of needs and desires rather than the profit motive or class control.

But these are precisely the kinds of social decisions that can be made rationally in a free society—free in particular from class-based notions of “progress” and “prosperity.” Humans are enormously resourceful. When people are allowed to freely express their imagination and creativity, many tasks which appear today as onerous will be superseded in ingenious and playful ways. But it is patently absurd to claim that all technologies currently in use are unusable just because they were developed under the reign of capital. It is a denial of material reality to pretend that a revolutionary society will find immediate solutions for the terrible scarcity and deprivation which has been created by capital.

To simply advocate destroying all machines while also advocating a society which consists of one perfect moment after another of pure, spontaneous love/play between individuals is completely ridiculous. A revolutionary society will not (despite mystical notions to the contrary) have absolutely nothing in common with this world.

One important conflict that will certainly appear in a revolutionary society is that between individuals' reluctance to spend a lot of their time in material production, and their desire or need for material comfort in the form of useful and/or playful goods. In our opinion, mechanical "slaves" may help to resolve this problem by freeing human beings from necessary tasks of material production without imposing an austere material environment. As we state in our leaflet, our interest in "high-tech" reflects our concern for relieving society of possibly burdensome productive activity to leave individuals "more time to cultivate their talents and pleasures."

When and if a widespread movement ...appears, then the debate over visions of a new, free society will take on great importance. If, as we can expect, a large motivating factor in the appearance of this movement is the rebellion against wage-labor, those who would like to destroy all productive facilities and machinery to "free" us from work will have the difficult task of showing us how exclusion of all labor-saving devices will have a liberating impact on our lives.

Chris and Caitlin

Union of Concerned Commies Berkeley, Calif.

The Fifth Estate responds

Note: Our comments are mostly directed at the UCC letter, number 3, but we consider the other two contributions as well.

Despite your claims to the contrary, we can only conclude that the society which you envisage closely resembles a futuristic dystopia, stratified and centralist, not a free and liberatory community. You praise the "possibilities (of) instantaneous, direct communication...in co-ordinating collective projects," and claim that "the greater the range of this communications, the greater the diversity of human experience." But you fail to question the nature of social relations based on mass, instantaneous communications systems. Let us turn the tables on you and ask a few simple questions: How do you expect this sophisticated equipment to be produced? What will be the role of the experts who supervise the production of the machinery as well as the dissemination of this "instantaneous information"? Information is no more neutral than technology. It is a form which capital has taken since the technological revolutions beginning in the middle of this century.

The kind of information which is transmitted through satellites and computer systems is a form of domination and power, inherently centralized, authoritarian and technocratic. Your fetish for "mechanical slaves" and "labor saving devices" shows that you still are totally dependent upon productivist notions of an activity defined as material production separated from an activity defined as play (we will assume you mean so-called "leisure time," one of the more onerous and insidious categories of life within capital), and proves that you haven't even begun to question the fundamental character of this society. Common sense will tell you that even mechanical slaves will ultimately have to be manufactured, transported, warehoused, distributed, repaired and discarded by human slaves, and that there never was any such animal as a "labor saving device." These slaves and devices fill our world with more tasks, strap more forms of labor to our backs. Furthermore, rather than diversify human experience, they homogenize its possibilities, standardize them to the rhythms of industrial production.

You accuse us of advocating destroying all machines, something we have never done. Since you have defined technology as simply the "manipulation of tools for various and sundry purposes," let us take the opportunity to at least propose a conditional, and partial definition on our part. We don't define a nomad's shoulder strap or spear as technology. If it is, and everything from rubbing flints to computerized nuclear reactors is defined within the same category, then the word is incoherent. We are talking about advanced, industrial technology, the stuff of civilization. Technology is the soul of capital: this society is technological by antonomasia, its name is technology, its motives are technological, its space and its time are defined by large scale production and by the mechanization of every aspect of human life, by the destruction of natural and human rhythms by the RPMs of technology. Not surprising, then, your defense of technology: you don't defend small-scale decentralized tools such as wine presses or ploughs, but the most advanced forms that this capitalist technology has taken. You obviously know exactly what we mean by the word in our criticism and that is what you defend. We prefer to take the point of departure of Paul

Hetznecker, who writes (see letter this issue): "It is precisely the civilization of technology which is the basis of all material relations, the condition which we seek to liberate ourselves from."

Precisely this: we wish to turn the factories into dance halls. No factory ever produced any food in our experience, and we suspect that the "food" which is produced in factories is poison. We never called for the destruction of all machines (though such a call is admittedly intriguing at least as a gesture), but we definitely oppose a point of view which immediately turns the poetry of the future into a technological manual.

Coquilles St. Jacques

Dora Kaplan

Primitivo Solis



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