Uncovering a Corpse

A Reply to the Defenders of Technology

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The letters which appear in this issue of the *Fifth Estate* do not represent the entire correspondence which has grown out of the discussion on technology. Some of our exchanges with readers of the paper became too broad, too lengthy, and too diffuse to make their publication possible, and so many of those debates will have to be deferred until they can be treated in a more organized manner. We also received many one- and two-line letters of support, some accompanied by donations and requests for more copies. We want to thank everyone who has shown support; we hope to do everything we can to strengthen our ties with them and aid them in the struggle against the sector of the machine in which they find themselves. To them we can only say: there is so much to do; let's get moving.

As for the letters which continue to disagree which we print here, I would like to address what I think are their main arguments. Hopefully, this will be the last time some of these basic questions are treated in this way in the pages of the *Fifth Estate*. The fundamentals can be debated until the end of time, but we don't have that long. I am not being sarcastic or arrogant here, just realistic. To those people who find the anti-technology perspective to be incoherent; who refuse to see the implications in the differences between small-scale regional technics and a global network of technology which has come to dominate every aspect of human life; who believe that the political and legal "system" of capitalism can be separated from the technical-bureaucratic social relations which characterize modern industrialized society everywhere; who see high technology and more innovations as the solution to the present crisis; who find a world without technology to be "inconceivable"; and who desire to take part in this technological "wave of the future"; there is little more for us to say. Perhaps you don't like the way we use the word technology and other terms because we are speaking different languages. You will always have a reply to our viewpoint. You remain unmoved both by our despair and by our hope. I am reminded of various occasions in which I have spoken from the heart about the misery of living in this society only to be told by co-workers or acquaintances that they are happy, that they love television, that they enjoy their jobs. What can I say?

Argument for its own sake is as pointless as it is wearying, and fencing with the dominant ideological pronouncements of this society over and over again—at a time when many people are beginning to see through them on their own—is not something which particularly interests me. Nevertheless, I would like to single out what I think are the most common objections to our perspective, because I think that they are central to the technological point of view; that is to say, they are the common wisdom of technology, the platitudes and the truisms which come not only from the day-to-day powerlessness and inertia which inform modern industrial civilization, but which also flow from the vast propaganda machine of corporate and technocratic power. They not only get said every day on television, the experience of watching television enforces them. And so on. In the end, even "rebels" adhere to them, and the utterances of the revolutionaries are identical to the advertisements of major corporations defending technology.

Argument 1. If you're against technology, throw away your typewriters.

This argument conveniently avoids the discussion raised by the anti-technology perspective by focusing on secondary questions. It smacks of "If you're so smart, why aren't you rich?" or "Love it or leave it." One could counter, at least in the case of those who claim to be against capitalism and who make use of this cynical objection, if you are against capitalism, throw away your money and your identification, refuse without exception to submit to bosses and cops.

By focusing on the contradictions in our limited activity, they think they can reduce a crisis of global proportions to a surveillance of our lives. "You don't like your job? Quit! You don't like it here on the ant heap? Leave!" Many people, because they do not aspire to something other than this life, relish catching us in the contradiction of not being able to realize our dreams, of having to compromise. But that doesn't change what we say, even if we too, end up succumbing.

Life within the technological wasteland turns the most insane acts into the "utilitarian" duties of common sense. We work for wages, we submit to authority (or suffer the consequences quickly), we go out and buy a car, fill the tank with gas, because we need to survive. But our "survival" is contradictory, because it maintains the cycle of our domination and because it is also killing us. Why do we go further, engaging in a project which demands the use of production techniques and machines? We have asked ourselves this before, and we could give it up tomorrow if other possibilities, a break which challenged the state of affairs and the affairs of the state, could be achieved. In fact, technology may render this backward form obsolete eventually, and we will be forced out entirely. We are hanging on by a string. You can be sure we won't be doing this with computer screens and video.

We are one small group among many uncovering a huge corpse—and a huge treasure. We have only begun to get a glimpse of what has disappeared, and by inference, of what is possible. At some point, the limitations which the technology of this project impose on us will become a hindrance and we will find a way to pass beyond them. Until then, we have no intention of being intimidated by self-righteous critics trying to find flaws in a general set of observations by applying a magnifying glass to the lives of their authors.

Argument 2. The anti-technological perspective "is neither new nor original."

This common criticism attempts to nullify our point of view because it has been said before by others. Imbued in this argument is this society's prejudice that what is new and "revolutionary" must be valid and what is old must be obsolete. But the technological optimism which propels such arguments is not new, either. This should come as no surprise to anyone, since the "technology debate" goes back at the very least as far as the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, and is foreshadowed in writings which go all the way back to antiquity.

In fact, it is not even accurate to say that the opposition to technology "dates back" to antiquity, since such a statement presupposes a line of successive stages of development in history. In reality, the question is posed every time technology invades a culture. Someone once said with tongue in cheek that all philosophy was only a footnote to Plato, in other words, that it only reiterated the same fundamental questions. Implicit in the observation was the notion that despite the fact that these questions have age-old import, they are rediscovered in new contexts which inevitably give them new meaning. We are saying what many have said, such as Rousseau, to be sure. But we are also saying what has been said by Chinese hermits, mystics, farmers, Luddites, anarchists, and indigenous people throughout history.

For instance, at the end of the eighteenth century, John McCullough, captured by Delaware Indians, came into contact with a critic of technology who came to be known as the Delaware Prophet and who influenced (among others) the Indians who fought with Pontiac during the uprising in 1763. The Delaware Prophet, writes Howard Peckham, in *Pontiac and the Indian Uprising*, "decried the baneful influence of all white men because it had brought the Indians to their present unhappy plight. He was an evangelist, a revivalist, preaching a new religion. He was trying to change the personal habits of the Indians in order to free them from imported vices and make them entirely self-dependent. He gave his hearers faith and hope that they could live without the manufacturers of the white men." Pontiac quoted the Delaware Prophet to his followers in April 1763, saying, "I know that those whom ye

call the children of your Great Father supply your needs, but if ye were not evil, as ye are, ye could surely do without them. Ye could live as ye did live before knowing them…Did ye not live by the bow and arrow? Ye had no need of gun or powder, or anything else, and nevertheless ye caught animals to live upon and to dress yourselves with their skins…" And the Delaware Prophet is in a sense the contemporary of the Waimiri Atroari tribe in Brazil which consistently fought invasions by missionaries, Indian agents, and road-building crews in the 1960s and 1970s. He is also the contemporary of Indians in Quebec presently fighting over their lands against the Canadian government, particularly since the increase of oil and gas exploration in the last few years in the northern areas of the country. One Montagnais Indian was quoted as saying, "Our way of life is being taken away from us," noting that the Indians had been "promised that with houses and schools and clinics and welfare we could be happy." He concluded, "But now we know it was all lies. We were happier when we lived in tents." ("Indian Groups Fight Quebec Over Fishing," *New York Times*, 7/26/81.)

The problem is age-old. If what we are saying is not new, the context is. The problem has never been more acute. Technology threatens to destroy all life on the planet. And so we go along having to uncover what was known and said already, rediscover our heritage. Within this context, it is the anti-technological perspective which is new, and what is "old," that is to say, what I have heard all my life from the day I started school or turned on a radio, is the platitude that technology is the great promise of the future, will solve its problems, will liberate us all. If anything, that viewpoint is old and stale, the same old jaundiced advertising jingle that we've been hearing all along.

Argument 3. "Technology is neutral. There is nothing inherently either good or bad about it. It is simply a tool, a servant, to be refined, directed and deployed by people for whatever purposes they want fulfilled."

So goes a paid advertisement of Alexander Haig's old company (he was its president before becoming Secretary of State), United Technologies. Translated into leftist terms, "bad guys" run technology, which has to be "expropriated" by "the people" in order to serve "human need." Apart from the pure demagoguery of the leftist position which sees technology "serving the people" as it envisions the state serving them, the notion that a conspiracy of capitalists keeps us from running the machinery of capital for "our own ends" is an illusion. As Langdon Winner has written (in his excellent book *Autonomous Technology*) it is necessary to realize that technology has shaped life, has recreated the basic patterns and content of life in its own image. In other words, "technology is itself a political phenomenon. A crucial turning point comes when one is able to acknowledge that modern technics, much more than politics as conventionally understood, now legislates the conditions of human existence. New technologies are institutional structures within an evolving constitution that gives shape to a new polity, the technopolis in which we increasingly live…Shielded by the conviction that technology is neutral and tool-like, a whole new order is built—piecemeal, step by step, with the parts and pieces linked together in novel ways—without the slightest public awareness or opportunity to dispute the character of the changes underway."

As Lewis Mumford has shown, culture and technology interact dynamically, "Every technical advance was intermeshed with necessary psycho-social transformations, both before and after," he wrote in *The Myth of the Machine*. And Ellul writes in *The Technological Society*, "The machine tends not only to create a new human environment, but also to modify man's very essence."

Technology is not a simple tool which can be used in any way we like. It is a form of social organization, a set of social relations. It has its own laws. If we are to engage in its use, we must accept its authority. The enormous size, complex interconnection and stratification of tasks which make up modern technological systems make authoritarian command necessary and independent, individual decision-making impossible. As Winner writes, "Seen as a way of ordering human activity, the total order of networks is anything but neutral or tool-like. In its centrality to the daily activity and consciousness of the 'employee' [by this term Winner describes the person as "employed" within the technical necessities of the apparatus], the function-serving human component, the technical order is more properly thought of as a way of life. Whatever else it may be, a way of life is certainly not neutral. Opportunities for 'use' or 'control' that the human components have within this system are minimal, for what kind of 'control'

is it that at every step requires strict obedience to technique or the necessities of technical organization?...'control' and 'use' simply do not describe anything about relationships of this kind. The direction of governance flows from the technical conditions to people and their social arrangements, not the other way around. What we find, then, is not a tool waiting passively to be used but a technical ensemble that demands routinized behavior."

Replacing the "bad guys" who "run" technology with the right people is obviously not the solution.

The massified technical structure can only exist through extreme specialization of labor, stratification of tasks, and bureaucratic management techniques. But the more complex the system has become, the less any one group can be said to run things. The capitalists manage their technology in the same way that they manage the economy. Replacing them with elected committees—of engineers and experts, we must assume, since who else will understand the peculiar problems of a particular industry or manufacture?—will not solve the problems of hierarchy, centralism, bureaucracy, and a generalized social opacity of the technical processes which will force the great majority of people to accept on blind faith what the computer programmers, the scientists, the managerial committees and the experts tell us.

Even the most dedicated bureaucratic organization cannot avoid the disasters of modern technology. Engineers and scientists know very well that every system has a probability factor which mathematically expresses the moment in which a system will break down or a metal will give way. And as far as human error goes, "mistakes will be made." Technology, by massifying the way in which everything is done and making us dependent on an apparatus, assures that the errors of a few will have widespread effects. And the bureaucratic nature of the structure, the isolation of its spheres of activity, add-to the momentum. Even technicians who are not out simply to preserve the privileges and the power which come from their project (such as a dam construction, say, which has turned into a catastrophe) believe in their system and will change figures, make errors of omission, and argue for solutions which are actually untenable. Those of us who are not there with the expertise and the information (perhaps we will be stuck repairing a broken down computer elsewhere in the system) will have to take their word for it. The botched construction of the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant is an interesting example. The wrong blueprints were used, and only the biggest and blindest conspiracy-addict would claim that such errors come from capitalist sabotage of its own projects. The fact is that the wrong blueprints are bound to be used, the sack of fire-retardant will inevitably get dumped by a distracted fork-lift driver into the animal feed (which caused the Michigan PBB catastrophe), the chemical wastes will accidentally get dumped into the river, and so on.

Defenders of technology as well as some of its critics also make the mistake of confusing technology with a specific product, which leads to the "laundry list effect." This is an endless cycle which tries to take an inventory of all the products and procedures of this society as separated, isolated artifacts. But technology encompasses the entire social process, the means and the instruments of production of these products, not just the products alone. It is the process of hierarchy, specialization, and chain of command. To state flatly, for example, that a tractor in the control of an agricultural conglomerate is a mechanism of the megamachine's "apparatus" but the same tractor in the hands of an agricultural commune is qualitatively different obscures the whole system of farming in which that tractor moves. To fail to trace the genesis of the product of technology, through all of the productive and distribution processes, the bureaucratic transmission of information and industrial credits, the mining and the exploitation of petroleum and other raw materials, the chemical processes with their attendant toxic wastes, and the very forms of farming which correspond to mechanized petroleum-based and fertilizer-based agricultural organization, is to desire one small segment of a process to be separated from the web of social and technical relations from which it emerges. This is not to flatly argue against tractors per se. But to demand "more tractors"—that is to say, more factories, more steel casting, more oil drilling, more supertankers, more geologists and engineers, more bureaucrats, more fertilizers, bigger farms to match the bigger and better tractors, more of this society and its technology—is to evade some basic questions about the nature of technology. To succumb to this reasoning is to succumb to taking inventories. It is senseless to be drawn further into arguing against tractors; one picks one's targets. There are certainly targets, such as nuclearism and nuclear weapons, chemicals and computers which are particularly baneful and must be fought. But they are linked to the other sectors and invade our lives everywhere. Their implications throw even the seemingly most benign aspects of the system into question.

The mechanization of agriculture was part of a long process of industrialization, urbanization, the demise of the small farm and the growth of the large factory-farm with its dependence on nitrogen fertilizers and machines.

Crop rotation gave way to continuous planting of certain crops. This didn't represent a conspiracy on the part of the capitalists but a tendency towards mechanization and massification in the entire society. It was the promise of technology which is still proclaimed by United Technologies and by Leftists. But these agricultural methods are now exacting their revenge, in erosion and loss of topsoil throughout the world. More intensification, more tractors, more fertilizers, will only speed up the process. Few seemed to realize this when such farming techniques and technological "advances" promised a doubling of food output. It wasn't a question of who controlled the process, but a devastation of ancient cultural forms and the emergence of a parasitic and destructive culture which made its great gains by robbery of the natural world and hence of its own future.

Argument 4. Opposition to technology is reactionary and downright dangerous.

The anti-technological perspective has the capacity to frighten some lovers of "progress," who look at it as a threatening atavistic outburst by irrational barbarians who seek to unplug iron lungs, starve the poor, and dovetail with the book-burning creationists of the "Moral Majority." One commentator on technology, Samuel C. Florman, has just published another book defending technology, *Blaming Technology: The Irrational Search for Scapegoats*, which argues, according to the advertisement "that it is not technology but *fear* of technology that is clouding our vision of the future." (Emphasis in original.) This book is probably just an update of his first book, *The Existential Pleasures of Engineering*, in which he calls anti-technology "a dangerous illusion" motivated by fear, claiming those who oppose technology, "frightened and dismayed by the unfolding of the human drama in our time, yearning for simple solutions where there can be none, and refusing to acknowledge that the true source of our problems is nothing other than the irrepressible human will…have deluded themselves with the doctrine of anti-technology. It is a hollow doctrine," he concludes, "the increasing popularity of which adds the dangers inherent in self-deception to all of the other dangers we already face." One gets the feeling that for Florman, the people who are turning away from the ideology of technological optimism are responsible for the ravages of technology, by not showing enough team spirit and faith to help technology solve "all of the other dangers we already face"—dangers which he treats only lightly, but dangers, which of course are in no way to be blamed on technology, but on "the type of creature man is."

This reasoning which posits the "irrationality" of the anti-scientific outlook of nostalgic idealists, just happens to coincide with the attitudes of the political, corporate and military leaders of this society. "So fast do times change, because of technology," goes the above-cited United Technologies advertisement, "that some people, disoriented by the pace, express yearning for simpler times. They'd like to turn back the technological clock. But longing for the primitive is utter folly. It is fantasy. Life was no simpler for early people than it is for us. Actually, it was far crueler. Turning backward would not expunge any of today's problems. With technological development curtailed, the problems would fester even as the means for solving them were blunted. To curb technology would be to squelch innovation, stifle imagination, and cap the human spirit." In this way, the corporation transforms the victim of technology into the culprit.

All of the defenders of technology who begin with this point of view end by invoking scientific progress and science in general over the dark "irrationality" of the barbarians and the fanatics. G. Mann, in a letter in this issue, writes, for example, that "the pursuit of scientific knowledge without the goal of applying such knowledge in the real world is inconceivable." An advertisement from Atlantic Richfield echoes these sentiments when it demonstrates the tight relation between modern science and technology in the statement, "Scientists say there are billions of barrels of oil still undiscovered in the United States. We have the technology to find it."

Though I am in no way a great defender of science, the notion that a scientific world view demands a technological outlook is simply not necessarily so. It is pure technological propaganda. Ellul's discussion of classical Greek society makes this clear. It is worth quoting from him fairly extensively to show that the technocrats haven't got the last word even on science. "The Greeks," he writes, "were the first to have a coherent scientific activity and to liberate scientific thought. But then a phenomenon occurred which still astonishes historians: the almost total

separation of science and technique. Doubtless, this separation was less absolute than the example of Archimedes [who destroyed his invention after it demonstrated his numerical reckonings] has led historians to believe. But it is certain that material needs were treated with contempt, that technical research was considered unworthy of the intellect, and that the goal of science was not application but contemplation…In their golden age of science, the Greeks could have deduced the technical consequences of their scientific activity. But they did not wish to. Walter asks: 'Did the Greeks, obsessed with harmony, check themselves at the very point at which inquiry ran the risk of going to excess and threatened to introduce a monstrosity into their civilization?'

"The Greeks were suspicious of technical activity because it represented an aspect of brute force and implied a want of moderation. Man, however humble his technical equipment, has from the very beginning played the role of sorcerer's apprentice in relation to the machine. This feeling on the part of the Greeks was not a reflection of a primitive man's fear in the face of something he does not understand (the explanation given today when certain persons take fright at our techniques). Rather, it was the result, perfectly mastered and perfectly measured, of a certain conception of life…In Greece a conscious effort was made to economize on means and to reduce the sphere of influence of technique. No one sought to apply scientific thought technically, because scientific thought corresponded to a conception of life, to wisdom. The great preoccupation of the Greeks was balance, harmony and moderation; hence, they fiercely resisted the unrestrained force inherent in technique, and rejected it because of its potentialities."

Some defenders of technology will argue that the existence of slavery explains the anti-technological attributes of the Greek conception of life. While slavery as a system was certainly related—among a multitude of factors—to the low esteem in Greek culture for manual labor and the lack of utilitarian values among its elites, to reduce a cultural outlook to a single factor is absurd. One could just as easily claim that the philosophical quest, the notion of tragedy, or any other number of cultural aspects were the results of slavery. But slavery existed in many societies and cultures, including the expanding technical civilization of the United States. The fact that the Greeks could have a scientific outlook without a technological-utilitarian basis proves, nevertheless, that such a conception of life is possible, and therefore a scientific society without slavery and without technology is also possible. Perhaps it is also necessary to point out that here Greece is not being taken as a model, only as a demonstration that a scientific world view is not necessarily the property of technology. The notion of application as a necessary result of scientific thought is actually just a repetition of old-fashioned capitalist utilitarianism. In fact, even science tends to be undermined as it is absorbed by technology.

As Eugene S. Schwartz has written (in his book *Overskill: The Decline of Technology in Modern Civilization*), as the ties between science and technology have grown closer and the two have fused, increased specialization and growing complexity, the necessity of large, centrally managed capital-intensive projects, and a pervasive utilitarianism have undermined even science. He writes, "The pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge or to satisfy curiosity or to fulfill a creative urge is fast becoming a luxury where pragmatic considerations of cost and resources pose serious constraints. The increasing utilization of science and technology by the state, for the purposes of the state, demands quick workable returns on investment. The sole drive of industrial civilization is utility in its economic manifestations—that is, products for consumption." This leads to what has been called "Big Science." "This science is far removed from dispassionate study that seeks truth. It is a science paced by technology and motivated by rapid realization of utility, which is a technical concept rather than a scientific one…Technology, the pragmatic and utilitarian process, is devouring science, and in the long run, hastens its own destruction."

The defenders of scientific rationality paint themselves in Voltairian hues, ready to take on all the chimeras and phantasms of the Dark Ages. Yet, once again, it is they who are behind the times, who make use of outmoded formulas which no longer (and perhaps never did) correspond to any real state of affairs. They repeat the common wisdom of the day, the scientism which is the new technological religion, the general theory of this brave new world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in a popular form, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its universal ground for consolation and justification. Just at a time when the technological optimism is eroding and people are beginning to move against its inertia in a myriad of ways, its defenders revive the putrid corpse of the Enlightenment to ward off the evil spirits of irrationality.

To claim that our opposition to the megamachine dovetails with obscurantism is slander. This technological society has learned quite well to co-exist with moral and religious reaction. The pseudo traditional milieu of born-

again Baptist Babbits living in tract homes and rooting for more military hardware, more electric chairs, and more nukes as they sit in front of their television sets watching "old time" religious revivals brought to them via satellite and sophisticated computerized propaganda techniques, is one of the last bastions of technological optimism. Another is to be found among leftists (and some anarchists), who while admitting the present "misuse" of the technological apparatus, foresee a glorious future for it. When everyone else has abandoned it, they will still be trying to inherit it from the corporate technocrats who direct it today. They love the "calculus of efficiency." They, like the politicians, the hucksters, the technocrats, the managers, love "what works." This is their faith; "science" does not enter into it. They surrender to the irrationality of a megamachine wired for destruction and leaking poisons into its own food and water because they cannot face the dark side of irrationality with which the primitive lives side by side. They are afraid of the earth, the night, the soil, and won't be happy until they have installed computer screens and fluorescent lights everywhere and have manufactured enough space shuttles to ship the proletariat off to other planets when this one is thoroughly poisoned. And what will they do when they get there? Commence strip-mining! All in the name of science and progress!

Argument 5. Primitivism is a romanticization of backward, flawed societies which had to inevitably give way to technological progress.

This is one of the most vicious arguments in defense of technology, though many times it conceals itself behind a posture of admiration for primitives, the kind which adults have for children's fantasies. One gets a sense of it reading *National Geographic* articles... You can't stop progress, and really, who would want to? You wouldn't want to live in those huts, would you?

If this argument derives strength on the one hand from people's general feeling of inability to keep former modes of living from passing away and communities from being broken up, it also provides a justification for the extermination of all societies which come into contact with the expansion of capital. Those ways had to go: schools, factories and hospitals had to be built, and besides, those buffalo made a mess of things. In any case, this civilization will reap all of the "positive" qualities of the previously eclipsed cultures while eradicating their "irrational, savage" elements. We can watch the Balinese dance on television, buy pottery from the reservation, have glossy reproductions of the cave paintings in our offices right over the word processor!

Everyone, of course (including Secretary of the Interior James Watt) sees as valid the "need to commune" with nature and non-technological societies. Primitivism is fine, as long as it is kept in its place: on weekends, and on reservations. It must be "finely counterbalanced" with the more substantive business of getting on with the demolition. Just as Watt is the "first conservationist," the technos are the first defenders of the primitive. Of course, tribal peoples "will have to join the human race eventually," as anthropologist Francis Huxley has said (see "The Vanishing Tribes," *Newsweek*, 10/12/81), but the extraordinary excesses of civilization's advance —such as machine gunning and napalming villages from helicopters and deliberately infecting them with disease—should be checked, so the normal excesses of bringing them into "the human race"—by way of the reservation, technology and the commodity—can presumably continue. What remains is a sort of "tourism of the marvelous," a museum of extinct cultures and modes of life which is constructed on the bones of the victims, the living creators of those cultures.

One correspondent argues that the destruction of these cultures "is not surprising," since they are "incapable of defending themselves or absorbing the civilizations with which they come into contact." This is a particularly repugnant argument, since it suggests that the victims are responsible for their own destruction. There must be something wrong with them, that they could not withstand the onslaught of more powerful invaders. But this is similar to the argument which seeks to blame the victims of nazi extermination for their own murders. There must have been something dreadfully flawed about their culture, something inferior if they would be so easily pushed into gas chambers by the nazi machine men. It bases its legitimacy on the technological will to power, just as nazi justification of the annihilation of "subhumans" would have based its actions on the fascist, "Aryan" will to power.

But these cultures suffered injustices and were as ridden with conflicts as this civilization, according to this argument. So they could not resist it; they were predisposed to succumb to it. But the problem is to be found less in

the "flaws" or in the divisions which may have existed in those societies than in the military might of technology and its power to destroy independence and replace it with relations of dependence. Contrary to being merely miniature versions of this civilization, as Francis Jennings has observed in *The Invasion of America*, "In early medieval Europe the greatest resistance to the powers of both church and state originated in the stubbornly maintained tribal customs of pagan and heathen countrymen."

Jennings shows succinctly that far from being the defects of the native American societies, it was (in part) their virtues which allowed them to be undermined by capital. Certainly, tensions and conflicts within societies and between societies, made it possible in many cases to explode them from within as civilization attacked them from without using guns and contaminated blankets. Internally, it corrupted the nature of the gift, introducing its iron and steel implements into Indian exchange, and its market into their hunting practices. How could these people have understood the implications of their actions when they accepted the implements of the whites any more than they could have when they taught the whites how to survive in the wilderness and thus assured that the whites would eventually dispense with them when they were no longer needed? There must have been elements in any tribal society predisposed to accept the gifts, enter into exchange, and through these fissures flowed the destructive forces which would explode the tribe and its autonomy.

Jennings writes of the intertribal trade that the introduction of European goods "created intertribal tensions where former trade had favored the friendship born of mutual advantage…previous intertribal cooperation turned into competition and conflict." But the Indians were not dealing with people like themselves, and they were bound to be undermined. "Perhaps the Indian's utter individualism in commerce which prevented an accumulation of capital by the tribes derived from his identification of trade as an extension of the tribal custom of 'prestation,' or gift-giving between peers. Such a conception would block understanding or acceptance of the hierarchical and bureaucratized structure of European business organization. Certainly lavish distribution of presents militated against capital accumulation by the tribal leaders, who would naturally have become property owners under other sanctions. The Indian's culture permitted and encouraged him to become a trader, but it forbade him to become a merchant." He concludes that "in a sense one can say that the Indians universally failed to acquire capital because they did not want it." Here we see the Indians functioning in a similar manner as the Greeks: their refusal of capital parallels the Greeks' refusal of technology. Their actions weren't determined by a mysterious and all-powerful mode of production, but flowed from a notion of life and culture which excluded that which this civilization uses to measure all things. Of course European culture has never allowed a secure place for people who care nothing about wealth, and nor have the whites ever left the Indians in peace who occupied lands which could be converted into capital—developed, in the most cynical and accurate sense of the word. "Ironically," writes Jennings, "it is the Indian's egalitarianism and generosity—traits much admired in European culture—that doomed him to the lowest echelons of the European social structure…"

But there is a tendency to find unjust practices or practices which are incomprehensible to us in order to dismiss the insights primitives offer us as an opposition to technology. No one is holding any specific primitive society as the perfect model of life. No society is perfect, and all have conflicts. It is, rather, this society by way of its technological and therapeutic ideology which attempts to suppress all conflict. Modernization hasn't even resolved age-old problems, only intensified them or suppressed them to replace them with even greater ones. The resolution of injustices in primitive societies must come from within, be generated by their own forces. Missionaries from the modern world only succeed in bursting those societies and colonizing them. We cannot judge every misfortune or conflict except against the mirage of universal reason, or the dialectic, or "historical necessity." But these shibboleths only mask capitalist accumulation. We end up converting the natives to socialism with nerve gas. When we are done—no socialism, and no natives. The desire to dissect these little, idiosyncratic, local communitarian societies flows into the monocultural conquest of this civilization. Its logic again manages to blame the victim for the crime.

Argument 6. "There are no easy answers," says an Atlantic Richfield advertisement. "Some say the answer is oil exploration. Some say the answer is conservation. For once, everyone is right…Without question, we must find more oil. And we must learn to use the oil we have more efficiently. So where do we start…?"

This argument bases itself on the feeling that we are stuck with technology, trapped with no way out. Better to follow the path to the end. An IBM ad says, "Most of us can't help feeling nostalgic for an earlier, simpler era when most of life's dealings were face-to-face. But chaos would surely result if we tried to conduct all of our dealings that way today. There are just too many of us. We are too mobile. The things we do are too complex—and the pace of life is too fast."

The technological culture and its demands end up as justifications for…technology. People who question this way of life are made to look like cranks and kooks while the calm, reasoned logic of the military strategists, technical experts and scientists is passed off as the height of wisdom. One is reminded of the headlines during the Three Mile Island crisis at the moment in which it was unclear what was going to happen with the bubble in the container: "Experts Optimistic," said one. Aren't they always?

But, "Without question, we must find more oil," write the corporate propagandists. If we accept the premises, then we are stuck with the conclusions. To disagree with the premises is to foolishly search for "easy answers." Mark Crispin Miller touches on this subject in his interesting article, "Tools and Monsters: The Robot in the Western Mind" (*The New Republic*, 5/16/81); "Sickened by industrial pollution, we look to be healed by more machines; machines can now reproduce in any home, the sights and sounds of landscapes which other machines have long since blighted; adventurous types, their energies made superfluous by automation and TV, can now arm-wrestle with a robot, or try to ride a bucking robot-'horse,' and so on. The apologists for robots claim that the new machines can liberate the worker from tedium and danger, but this assurance raises more questions than it answers. Why should the job be done at all? To build how many extra thousands of which superfluous machines?" In fact, he notes, technology seems to seek solutions to the destruction that it has itself caused. Indeed, the catastrophes that technology has perpetrated are so immense and far-reaching that perhaps only technological means can even begin to deal with them. What is to be done with chemical and nuclear wastes? Here the technicians smile and say, "You need us." But their "solutions" not only legitimize and tend to prolong the original causes of the disaster, but tend to aggravate it even further. Now we are faced with the innovation of chemical waste dumps to solve the problem of toxic wastes, which is already proving to lead to other difficulties. But we need technology, they argue, we've got to put this stuff somewhere! And to not join in the chorus is to seek "easy answers."

About one thing they are right: there are no easy answers. They are the ones who promote the notion of the easy answer through their optimistic messages of concern: just leave it up to us, let us do the driving. We'll give you what you have had all along, and you'll have to accept our decisions since who else is qualified but us to make them? Leftists also believe in the easy answer.

That is why they always demand that we reveal our "program." If we don't have a program to find a way out of the crisis, only a notion of what we desire and a distrust of their technological optimism, then we have nothing to say, no solutions. We are accused of lacking hope or a vision.

One of our critics, a defender of technology, accuses us of presenting "a picture of the contemporary world that is so hopeless, that it's not worth worrying over." But even those who are in agreement with us fall under this thinking. John Zerzan, for example, criticizes the "absence of a connection between the critique and its use," calling it "too remote," "academic," "a profound indictment minus any everyday applications." We weren't trying to come up with "everyday applications," but trying to put into general terms a description of what is taking place, of the depth of the cultural crisis of this civilization. We are in the midst of this crisis, too; we don't have a formula to show us the way out. We only know that the problem isn't administrative or political, but cultural; that this civilization is in the midst of a crisis which is unprecedented in scope, a crisis that makes the collapse of antiquity look like a

backyard birthday party in comparison. We have only begun to articulate the problem, to get a sense of it, and he faults us for not providing everyday applications.

Zerzan accuses the writers of the anti-technology issue [FE #306, July, 1981] of reformism in the very places where we suggest possible avenues of resistance, so it is probably fortunate that we did not go into any detail. The fact is that he will probably never be satisfied with the applications attempted by people because they will never fit his formula. The little communities which defend themselves'—the struggles of land-based, indigenous peoples, of communities against chemical plants and nuclearism, against war, for some control over their lives—will always seem reformist to him. He finds defects in their activities because he goes looking for them. An example is his reading of "Indigenism and Its Enemies" in the last issue. He turns the following sentence into a call for "a critical sociology" with its suggestion of "a retention of specialization and even of the university": 'A new and critical anthropology, a new critique, a new 'planetary indigenism,' can only signify a qualitative break with civilization, with modern technological social relations, and must signify a reconciliation with pre-history." Far from being the defeatists that he accuses us of being, a little further on, the same article speaks of "a past and a future in which modern and primitive will be reconciled in the search for human possibilities beyond everything that we have imagined." His slur on Jacques Ellul, to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude, is another such case. Reality is strange and irrational. I am no longer surprised when I find a common basis for discourse with people unlike myself. When priests and nuns batter the nose cone of a nuclear warhead and are arrested for living out the ethical necessities of their Christian philosophy, do I merely spit and write them off because they are clerics? Unlike Zerzan, I no longer have any formulas. Things are not so simple as we would like them to be

John accuses us of defeatism. I must admit that I am pushed back and forth along a spectrum of hope and despair. I don't have answers, applications, solutions, or a program. I think it is a beginning to point out that the enormous crisis which engulfs this civilization has its roots in capital expansion, massification, technology and rootlessness. But I too am caught up in it. I can't even stop the banks from bulldozing a favorite field of mine—restful to the eyes, flush with wildflowers and pheasants in the middle of the city—and building Soweto-style housing on it. (I can hear the beepers on the heavy equipment as I type this.) I'm dependent like everyone else on the sewer system for my water and the Teamsters for my food. I'm witness to the massacres. I'm part PBB. I am not sure how deep the problem goes and I know that much of What poses as a solution ends up being-another renewal of the energies of the machine. I know that nuclearism must go, but I don't have practical applications to deal with the Wastes or to dismantle reactors, etc.

What is necessary minimally is to present a different point of view, to make inflammatory statements, to not only question how things are done but why they are done in the first place. And I am trying to make contact with the marine biologists and the fishermen who know the problem intimately, with disillusioned anthros and leftists, with farmers who dynamite electrical towers, with native peoples trying to defend their lands, with anyone who is going through this cycle of pessimism and hope that I am. If you wonder why I have so little good news, it is because there isn't much good news to be had. The crisis looms greater every day. And if you perceive a note of despair, it may be that there is reason to despair. But just as, in Marcuse's words, "Nihilism as the indictment of inhuman conditions may be a truly humanist attitude," pessimism—intransigent, brittle, unyielding in its denunciation of this society—may reflect a true vision of hope and of the possibility of renewal. Revolutionaries! One more (great) effort if you would understand that you are no different from the rest of us.

I believe in the possibility of a conscious break with' this civilization and its technology, a break which is conscious just as the Greeks' refusal of technology was conscious and the Indians' refusal of capital was conscious. I am not sure how even to begin except to state the existence of such a possibility. That is a very small step, but you begin where you can. But a new cultural vision must be forged in the rejection of the technological world view and in the struggle against the power of technology over our lives. Of this I am sure. Such a culture won't actually be entirely new; it will derive its strength from a wisdom which is as old as the hills, as contemporary as the Delaware prophet and the Chinese philosopher Chuang-tzu, who said: "...whoever uses machines does all his work like a machine. He who does his work like a machine grows a heart like a machine, and he who carries the heart of a machine in his breast loses his simplicity. It is not that I do not know of such things; I am ashamed to use them.

T. Fulano (David Watson)
Uncovering a Corpse
A Reply to the Defenders of Technology
1981

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