

# More debate on Technology

Does FE View mean “War on Technology?”

Various Authors

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## Dear Fifth Estate:

The cover graphic of the mushroom cloud with the word WAR! in seven centimeter lettering across the front struck me as highly appropriate for the *Fifth Estate* (See FE #307, Nov. 19, 1981). It would seem to me that a worldwide nuclear war would surely be a progressive step towards “Paleolithic Liberation.” In all your polemics against technology and in your point by point rebuttals to pro-tech arguments you never seem to deal with the sort of question I am inclined to raise. Namely, how do you expect 4 billion people to sustain themselves on this planet in a hunter gatherer mode of production?

The population of the planet in paleolithic times was a mere fraction of one percent of the present population. This was true for a reason; human beings needed to live within the carrying capacity of their environment. There is an optimal level in the ratio of the number of human beings to a given ecosystem for a given mode of production. I would suggest that the development of agriculture, the state, classes and technology has been a long term process of intensification of production in response to rising population pressures. With each new innovation (i.e. Semi-nomadic agriculture to sedentary rainfall agriculture to irrigation agriculture, etc.) the carrying capacity of the environment is increased making further population expansion possible which leads to eventual depletions and pressure towards still more intensified production strategies.

With the development of newer modes of production for larger populations there have been various trade-offs. These have included the development of despotic bureaucracies such as the techno-managerial elite which solidified itself permanently as a class in China around 500 BC in control of the elaborate irrigation system which developed there in response to the food demands of a rising population. Although there have been “revolutions” and conquests by foreign invaders throughout China’s history, the region has always been ruled by a bureaucratic ruling class and continues to this day. Other tradeoffs have included longer working hours and greater and greater degrees of alienation.

The *Fifth Estate* makes its strongest theoretical contributions in its analysis of alienation, dehumanized mechanized labor and the techno-wasteland culture. I find myself agreeing with practically all of your arguments while agreeing with virtually none of your conclusions. There can be no denying the role that technology, especially centralized heavy industrial production, has had in degrading the spontaneity and creativity of the human spirit in favor of a homogenized, docile workforce of obedient order-takers. To assert that this is an inevitable result of technology in any form misses the point entirely, though.

## The factory as a force for social control

The factory as a force for social control did not develop through some sort of process inherent in technology itself, it was developed deliberately by capitalists in their early efforts to secure greater control over the workforce. I would direct your attention to John Zerzan's "Industrialization and Domestication" (see FE #287, October 28, 1977) for a closer look at the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century class struggles I am referring to. The modern factory was developed, in part, as a weapon of the capitalist class in the class struggle.

Virtually all technology in history has developed within a class matrix of one sort or another. Yet you seem to regard technology as being an independent force with an intrinsic mad logic all its own and unconnected to any sort of class analysis. I am not arguing that technology in its present form will be liberating and non-alienating if only the "good guys" take it over from the "bad guys." An assembly line will always be alienating to some degree, even if it is under total workers' control.

I see three major directions in which our species can go. The first is towards the continually expanding techno-managerial Orwellian computer Mega-state. This would involve greater and greater interlocks amongst the planet's ruling elites, greater control over the lives and thoughts of individuals, and a steady erosion of individual liberty, free thought and free expression.

The second likely direction is mass self-destruction through a nuclear war or an eco-catastrophe. This second course would favor the FE's goals, in my view, as it would drastically reduce the population pressures of the human species for obvious reasons. The question of how a reduced human population could live in a Paleolithic mode of production and have enough for everyone to eat remains only partially answered at best.

The third choice which our species has is towards an ecologically sound, decentralized humanistic technology. There is simply no other way to support the basic needs of 4 billion people without some forms of technology or a massacre. If you can prove me wrong, please do so and I will eat my typewriter. That's a promise!

Population control is going to be essential one way or the other. The techno-megastate will accomplish this through war, genocide, family planning by government decree, and through forced sterilization of "undesirables." The alternative is voluntary, rational population control by a cooperative planet-wide confederation of ecologically-based autonomous communities. The alternatives are Big Brother or the mushroom cloud on the cover of the FE (or both!).

In Support of Your Paper (even though we disagree).

Chris Dugan

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## Dear FE'rs:

Thanks for sending the back issues of your splendid rag. I read all the technology articles and those on primitivism. (FE note: see July 1981 and Nov. 19, 1981 for major articles). I very much enjoyed them, and believe it or not, agreed with much of it. But I find your case overstated and underdeveloped.

It seems typical of the polemical traditions of the left to adopt "maximalist" positions, in high-flown rhetoric, as a prelude to being forced to define your terms more precisely—to make the hard choices. It strikes me as a sort of intellectual bargaining position, perhaps with shades of self-advertisement as well.

I don't believe you have adequately defined this difference between "technology" and "tool," except to say that one means oppressive social organization while the other means independence. Sorry, but I still fail to see what is inherently oppressive about billions of individuals pooling information through a decentralized micro-computer network.

Also, you fail to take any note of the problem of parochialism which "totally" independent tools implies. I agree that we must learn from primitive societies. But as far as I know, there are no extant societies which do not know some form of (perhaps highly ritualized) warfare—except save Eskimo tribes which are permanently "at war" with

an extremely harsh environment. Doesn't totally independent "paleolithic" tool-ology imply that other tribes must be always just those people over there—who do not usually help us but may someday hurt us, taking up space, threatening our space?... other tribes which are always other.

The biblical curse of Babel—what hope is there for overcoming it except through increased ease of communication and transportation? This is not to say that all languages must be standardized—although this is what is happening, to be sure, through English and international techno-speak. But we could develop a less Indo-European version of Esperanto (with the help of computers!) and let a thousand tongues and literature bloom!

Furthermore, your arguments against labor saving "technology" are often childish. The cartoon says, "Assuming that (labor) could actually be reduced at all through increased mechanization...the workers manufacturing such productive machines would have made no real improvement in their lives." But who says they have to be the same people? What if each of us "worked" one year out of our whole lives? The letter from Gypsy Damian Lawless (FE Nov. 19, 1981) reasons that "In order to produce a tractor, land that could otherwise grow food must be used for factories and dug up for the metals and petroleum needed to produce the tractors..." This is like saying that if you are building houses you must never make a ladder—it will use up too much wood! The most elementary economic reasoning will show that the amount of extra food grown with the addition of a few tractors more than make up for the small amount of land—preferably poorly soiled land—taken out of cultivation. Lawless goes on to say that tractors are only useful with monoculture and chemical fertilizers—but this is nonsense as well. (S)he accepts the definitions of capital as immutable.

In conclusion, to sing my old song on once more, we need to get past the left-intellectual luxury of lovely vague blanket negations—blankets in which we then cuddle up, soft and warm from thinking through the hard question: What the hell do we want? I don't mean a lot of latinate abstractions; what's in your tool box?

Jim Stodder  
Wivenhoe, England

## **John Zerzan responds:**

To see class society as the "response to rising population pressures" is to view it as a natural, inevitable outcome and neglect the tragic struggle of communal life against its domination. For an anarchist, I would have thought Kropotkin's stress on mutual aid and the perfectibility of society would be far more pertinent to the question of population than Hobbes and Malthus, who seem larger influences and who bolstered bourgeois ideology by elevating the scarcity of resources and proclaiming the constancy of the ethical limitations of humanity.

Similarly, your prescription of a 'Planet-wide confederation' to somehow control population on a "voluntary, rational" basis seems to me way off for one who, presumably, desires a free, unmediated condition of life. I would think that either people will apprehend and express the dimensions of anarchy directly or they will need the lingering authority of global bureaux. Not both.

In the matter of technology, here also a couple of unsound notions. You cite my "Industrialism & Domestication" as a corrective to the idea, allegedly the Fifth Estate's, that technology is independent of the social and political framework in which it is found. Yet the FE was the original publisher of this essay and I've seen no evidence that the paper's staff has ever disputed the article's thesis that a designed social control intentionality was the hallmark of factory-system technology.

On the other hand, there has been a willingness in the FE to consider the sense in which present and future technology tend toward a life of their own. Here there has been an effort to critically assess the extent to which Jacques Ellul is correct that technology is becoming itself an independent system dominating society.

Concerning the definition of technology, or rather the point at which "technology" becomes a destructive influence, here I think you have also misread the FE.

Recent anthropology (e.g. Marshall Sahlins, R.B. Lee) has completely reversed the view that original, hunter-gatherer life was nasty, short and brutish, in favor of recognizing in the Stone Age the original affluent society, in which work was neither valued in itself or needed in great amounts and in which the spirit of the gift dominated.

But as I see it, the attention accorded this momentous discovery and its implications has not meant that a foraging way of life is an exact formula promoted to end the profound alienation of humanity from itself and nature. Eschewing blueprints, the FE has mainly tried to show that the myths of progress have concealed much about our origins, and has also tried to see through to the nature of the technology that now envelops us.

I tend to think the line should be drawn between tools and machines. It is here that division of labor, with its diminution of the individual, begins, and its consequence, the arrival of the effective power of specialists. The devitalization and depersonalization so vivid today perhaps finds its axial point back at the distinction between tools and machines. Langdon Winner, in his *Autonomous Technology*, put it this way: "One can seek the high levels of productivity that modern technological systems bring. One can also seek the founding of a communal life in which the division of labor, social hierarchy, and political domination are eradicated. But can one in any realistic terms have both? I am convinced that the answer to this is a firm 'no.'"

Of course, we are meant to believe that we would all die if technology were dismantled. We are so steeped in it that the simple idea of growing our own food is not what springs to mind but rather the artificial problem of how to "coordinate" its "Production." Instead of the notion of natural ways of birth control, related to the condition of being one with our own bodies, there is an unthinking assumption of factories that produce surgical steel, plastics and other dependency-maintaining substances. Today's growing distrust of high technology, however, and the "surprising" recent movement, as noted in 1980 census analysis, away from the cities to small towns and rural areas are two phenomena that point away from massified, complex technology.

But if one continues to think in terms of "production," and sees the assembly line as merely alienating "to some degree," then the essential point of the FE's quest for the bedrock of freedom is being missed.

## **For A Non-Administered World**

E.B. Maple responds:

How, suddenly, do we get tarred by Chris Dugan for what capitalism threatens—nuclear holocaust and totalitarianism? To charge, as does the Fifth Estate,—that the potential for both calamities has its roots in the techniques of the modern world hardly suggests that we are responsible for the process. In fact, it is that very process we would hope would be eliminated at the time of the reestablishment of a human community. This is not a political program that we intend to see enforced on people, but rather a desire that people freed from the productive fetishes of this society would be content to live without most of the technology that is the hallmark of capitalism.

Also, nothing but a sense of foreboding strikes me when I hear distinctly political formulas for the future. The whole phrase of Dugan's, "a cooperative, planet-wide confederation of ecologically-based autonomous communities," seems at best a pipe dream and at worst a prescription for and a continuation of the very authoritarianism he fears. If you don't mind, I don't want my affairs subjected to the schemes of his "planet-wide confederation." Its sci-fi attraction aside, it is the dream of the planners, and behind them always stand the cops. I don't want to work in a "widget" factory linked up by micro-computers to other "production/distribution units." This is what capital already plans; it is the language of the multi-nationals.

Stodder raises other problems, but his discussion of language distresses me the most. Capital is already foisting its own universal language on the world and destroying others at the rate of fifty a year. This "biblical curse of Babel" that Stodder talks so contemptuously of is what has given the species its rich diversity, and to advocate its elimination is to unwittingly line up with the genocidal logging and development enterprises in the Philippines and Brazil; it is to approve of the cultural obliteration of small tribal bands whose fragile infrastructure is ripped apart by the arrival of the modern world into their jungle or forest sanctuary, in effect taking people who are in perfect harmony with their environment and turning them into busboys at a Manila MacDonalds.

"Let a thousand tongues and literatures bloom!" is exactly the situation which prevailed before the emergence of the modern era, but the "cooperative, planet-wide confederation of ecologically-based autonomous communities" will most assuredly have only one—computer language, computer culture. Dugan's and Stodder's dream of a perfectly coordinated existence, borne as it is out of the chaos this system produces, may perhaps originate out of admirable motives, but it is really only more of the same.

Let me say it in clear terms: planning is impossible anywhere but at the most localized level and can only take place in a democratic fashion when shared by people who enjoy face-to-face relationships. A computerized, planned world will be a dreadful nightmare, but, again, it is one that capital already has well in the works. We must stand in opposition to this process, not be its cheerleaders. We must opt for a non-administered world, one which returns to a balance and harmony found in the old ways. And it's not simply because this is more in harmony with our values, but that the schemes of the planners will never work. The chaos will continue and the demand for order will follow. Then the modern world's capacity for both war and totalitarianism will be realized.

One other quick note: It seems to amaze our critics that we contend that "there is no such thing as a laborsaving device"—a statement which originated not with us, but which was uttered by 19<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher John Locke. It seems to take only a little effort to think through what this means: you can obviously do more sewing with an electrical or even treadle-powered sewing machine than by hand, but the total amount of societal labor which goes into the production of the machines, their storage, transportation, marketing, repair, etc., and the amount of things that are then sewn both voluntarily and as wage work raise the overall amount of time spent in the activity to an immense leap over what was expended prior to the machine's production. Ivan Illich makes the point well in his *Tools for Conviviality* that once a society decides it wants to travel faster than 15 mph, more and more time is spent in actual travel and in the production of vehicles for doing so. The mass introduction of so-called labor-saving devices has meant that no people other than "expendable" slaves have spent so much time at daily work. To contend otherwise is to ignore history and to apologize for wage labor.

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See other comments on technology in Letters in this issue.

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