

# A System of Domination—Technology

George Bradford responds

George Bradford (David Watson)

In response to a letter from Jeffrey Vega, *Tech Examined* FE #315, Winter 1984.

Is it too much to ask that our critics take the time to read at least some of the voluminous material on the technology question rather than simply repeating the “well-worn” platitudes familiar to us all? In this case Jeffrey Vega would like to resolve a complex problem with a simple sleight-of-hand: look up the word in the dictionary and in such a way close the discussion by sanctioning the commonplaces which serve to mystify technology. Since his dictionary refers to “machines—not a system of domination,” there seems to be nothing to worry about; it must all be a neutral, passive machine or tool ready to be used in any way we desire.

Unfortunately for his neat, convenient solution, the dictum of an eighteenth century philologist remains appropriate: dictionary, cemetery. While the dictionary is undeniably useful, its severe limitations in describing actual, contemporary social phenomena should be obvious. For example, if our smug lexicographer were to look up capitalism in his dictionary, he would find nothing about exploitation, alienation, or domination, only a reference to the private ownership of the means of production. Would he therefore conclude that discussion of capitalism as more than private ownership, as a system of domination, is merely a “theoretical device”?

An etymological dictionary, and the careful historical evaluations of technology to be found in the material which Vega has not bothered to read, reveal that the meaning of the constellation of terms related to the Greek root *techne* (meaning art or artifice) has changed over time. Such words as technique, technics, and technology tend to overlap in meaning. They are not static, universal, neutral terms; they reflect actual social relations as well as a specific process of historical development. If the commonly accepted meaning of such words has undergone a transformation corresponding to the changes in the technical phenomena to which they refer, it is arguable that the present definition found in most dictionaries no longer adequately expresses the nature of the phenomena in their present manifestation or evolutionary tendencies.

## From Spears to Computers

Vega’s (and Hayley’s) argument that class society is “rooted” in primitive community is paralleled by his simplistic identification of all technical phenomena and objects from a spear to a computer. This “inevitability thesis” is simply a bald assertion based on the inescapable fact that one phenomenon preceded the other, but explains nothing about the character of the transformation, whether or not it is a continuation of elements or a rupture and opposition. Because primitive societies are not without conflict, are not the seamless utopias which could only exist in the fantasies of the technologized mind, and because technical operations and objects can exist in non-technological societies, such a discussion is not clear-cut. It is clear that there is no absolute, clean division between what constitutes technique (which in its earliest usage in French meant generally a certain manner of doing

something, a method of procedure), a humane technics which is limited and culture-bound, and a technological system which tends toward embracing the totality of society.

There is a certain procedural instrumentality which a painter applying paint to a canvas (or cave wall), a farmer planting seeds, and an electronics technician testing the strength of some metal in a nuclear device all share. That doesn't mean, however, that the character of their activities is identical. As Jacques Ellul has observed, "It is not, then, the intrinsic characteristics of techniques which reveal whether there have been real changes, but the characteristics of the relation between the technical phenomenon and society."

The changes in technique discussed by Ellul can be seen in history. Here it should be noted that there is an interpenetration, even a semantic problem between the terms technique and technology in French and English which is discussed, but not entirely resolved in my view, in Ellul's recent book, *The Technological System*. Probably, the most workable approach for our purposes would be to suggest a provisional definition of these terms, considering technique to be that procedural instrumentality—whether spontaneous, as simply a manner in which something is done, or methodical—which is shared by all human societies but which is not necessarily identical in its motives or its role in those societies; technics to be technical operations or the ensemble of such operations using tools or machines—again, not necessarily identical from society to society, and not necessarily methodical or spontaneous; and technology to be the rationalization or science of techniques (which is close to the dictionary definitions), the geometric linking together, systematization and universalization of technical instrumentality and applied science within society, which brings to light its emergence as an autonomous power and social body. Such definitions may not be perfect, but they make it possible to better explore the complex nature of the technological phenomenon and the civilization and its codes which are intrinsically technological.

As society changed, technology came to mean the science of building and exploiting machines. The notion of applied science emerged as a central motivation and value of the society along with quantification, time keeping, mechanization and production—hardly a machine but an entire world of meaning and a world of means. And though technology resulted in the appearance of a new religious mysticism—the worship of technical prowess, the hypnosis of technical magic linked to the crude, materialist pragmatism of efficiency of means—the meaning of technology, its historical character, has remained hidden behind ideology: either it is universal and identical everywhere, or it doesn't exist at all, is just a simple tool or technique like all previous tools and techniques, a static object which we can manipulate like a hammer. Either way its reality as a system disappears.

## **Impose Modern Outlook**

Technical operations existed (and exist) in societies which are non-technological. The technical phenomenon does not come to define all activity in the society, does not shape its social content. Rather, it is a secondary, sporadic mediation, embedded in culture. The very diversity of primitive and archaic societies to which Vega refers is evidence that though these societies can be said to share a basic level, or set of technical elements (such as the use of containers, farming and gathering techniques, food preparation, artistic inventiveness, etc.), their individuality, their motives, their inter-relatedness is unique, independent, culture-bound, kinship-bound. In all of them neither technique in general nor specific technical activities or objects define how they choose to live their lives. In such a world, Ellul notes in *The Technological Society*, "The activity of sustaining social relations and human contacts predominated over the technical scheme of things and the obligation to work, which were secondary causes." But, he adds, "Because we judge in modern terms, we believe that production and consumption coincided with the whole of life." By doing so, we impose the modern technological outlook on all life, thus blinding ourselves to the qualitative transformations which have taken place, the penetration by technology into every domain of life, and the materialization of this transformation in the technological gigantism and massification of the modern world with its accompanying reorganization of life along its own lines. Ellul again:

"The techniques which result from applied science date from the eighteenth century and characterize our own civilization. The new factor is that the multiplicity of these techniques has caused them literally to change their character. Certainly, they derive from old principles and appear to be the fruit of normal and logical evolution. However, they no longer represent the same phenomenon. In fact, technique has taken substance, has become a

reality in itself. It is no longer merely a means and an intermediary. It is an object in itself, an independent reality with which we must reckon.”

Society becomes its own technical organization (notwithstanding the dysfunctional imbalances which are the residues of the collapse of archaic societies and of uneven development). People lose their old, traditional techniques and become dependent upon the apparatus: mass production is the production of masses. The human being is transformed along with the content of social life. Technology is not a tool but an environment, a totality of means enclosing us in its automatism of need and production and the geometric runaway of its own development.

As Langdon Winner has argued in his book *Autonomous Technology*, “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.” What results is a form of social organization, an interconnection and stratification of tasks and authoritarian command necessitated by the enormity and complexity of the modern technological system in all of its activities. Winner makes this very clear when he observes, “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.”

## Humans As Machine

The automobile, for example, is not a tool; it is the totality of the system (and culture) of production and consumption which it implies, a way of life. Its use alone makes its own set of demands apart from the necessities inherent in production. A highway system is hardly a neutral instrument. It is a form of technical giantism and massification. In this light, it is much more important to analyze the distinctions between a spear and a missile than to concentrate on their common traits. It is important to ask what kind of society they reflect. In the first case we see a hand tool made locally with a minimum of technique, and that technique embedded in a universe of cultural meaning. Each tool is unique and reflects the individuality of its user or maker. In the case of the latter we see an entire hierarchy, an extremely complex division of labor which isolates each member of the process within an alienated, compartmentalized instrumentality blind to the overall process or its result. In the first case the creator works directly with the materials, which is to say, in nature. In the second case, the worker is alienated from the materials of nature; nature is not only depleted and destroyed by exploitation and objectification, by the inevitable destruction. to be unleashed by the instrument, but, as Ellul observes, “by the very establishment of technology as man’s milieu.” In the case of the spear, human limits are implied, though human beings could choose to organize themselves as a machine to do greater destruction, as they did in the ancient state megamachines. In the case of the missile, however, the organization of human beings as a machine, as a network of production and destruction, is fundamental to what is produced, and the only limit implied is that which is attained with the ultimate annihilation of the human race by its technology. And so if there is perhaps an underlying perversity in all instruments of violence or war, whether primitive or technological, we can see that in the former the kind of war which takes place is a limited, personalized, sporadic activity, which, along with peacemaking and intermarriage, is a moment in a network of reciprocity tending toward the resolution of conflicts. The missile production is an unlimited, depersonalized, institutional system which magnifies human destructiveness to the point of genocide. (For a discussion of such contrasts, see “Primitive War vs. Civilized War: Some Contrasts,” reprinted from Stanley Diamond’s *In Search of the Primitive*, in FE #312 Spring, 1983.)

In this sense it becomes possible to question the spurious distinction between capital and technology. Both words are metaphors, partial descriptions which represent the modern organization of life. The state is an apparatus of administrative technique which cannot be separated from the corporate organizations of centralized, technological hierarchy. Economic planning and the market are submerged in technique. Technological automatism and remote control, standardization and mass propaganda are leaving classical bourgeois society behind; it has therefore become crucial to look at the nature of the mass society which mass technics has engendered.

The myth of technology separate from its “use” reflects the same misunderstanding inherent in the concept of “socializing” the “means of production.” This is as if these means were simply the instruments, the factories, su-

pertankers, computer networks, and mass agrosystems, and not that universe of means: the daily activities of the people who participate in these systems, and as if these means did not require the inevitable characterological internalization of these means in human beings. As Lewis Mumford warned in *The Pentagon of Power*, such denatured beings tend to become so conditioned so as to be incapable of imagining any alternatives. Even where they recognize the malfunctions and dangers in the technological system, they “see no way of overcoming them except by a further extension of automation and cybernation

It is the system itself that, once set up, gives orders.” This “self-inflicted impotence” is “the other side of ‘total control.’ “Technology—systematized, “rationalized” mass technics—is more than the sum of its parts; this totality undermines human independence, community and freedom, creating mass men who are creatures of the universal apparatus, standardized subjects who derive their meaning from the vast networks of “mass communication”: a one-way barrage of mystification and control. (Yet even those ostensibly “behind the machines” are themselves its creatures, each one isolated in a compartment of the giant, opaque hive, so such “control” is ambiguous. The conspiratorial notion of “technocracy” is outmoded. The blind, centrifugal complexity of the system defies conscious control, coming more and more to resemble a locomotive with no throttle hurtling towards an abyss.)

It is in this context that E.B. Maple’s statement is so cogent, that “Capitalism has evolved to a state in which its material and cultural structures appear to dominate the entire spectrum of possibilities—no matter how badly it functions, nothing else seems possible.” What are the implications of this insight, with its indirect reference to mass society and the automatism of technology, for the potential for revolt and the creation of a libertarian human community? The notion of periodic economic crisis bringing about the collapse and negation of capital is absurd because even a change in the economic infrastructures would not necessarily bring about any change in the technological organization of life. Workers Councils, democratic planning commissions and the like would be swallowed by the necessities of technique and the hypnotism of mass (pseudo) communications.

To continue, as marxists do, to pose the seventy-year-old battle cry of “socialism or barbarism” in the face of economic dislocation and crisis, is to cry “wolf” long after the wolf has arrived. In fact we have been experiencing this technological “barbarism” throughout the last century, if not since the rise of industrialism. To call on the proletariat—which along with bourgeois society is being eclipsed by technological civilization—to overthrow a nonexistent “capitalism” somehow separate from the massified technological structures of life, is to call out an army which has crumbled, against an image of society which no longer corresponds to reality.

Even during its heyday the proletarian movement was incapable of overthrowing capitalist society and the emerging technological superstate. But now its possibilities as a movement and a class have been diminished even further; the appearance of mass society and the increasing marginalization and dispersal of the industrial proletariat within technological civilization have not only destroyed the once flourishing proletarian culture and associations which made it possible to in some way resist capital, they have destroyed the centrality of this class to the functioning of capital as well.

This is not to argue that class struggle will cease to occur; but where it no longer serves openly as the rationalizing and organizing force for statified capital (in so-called under-developed countries), it becomes simply the struggle of one sector of the population to defend its own increasingly undermined interests within the unchallenged sphere of technological social relations. Which is why marxists who propose as “anti-capitalist” the struggles of workers against austerity, or to keep their steel mills and shipyards operating when technology and investment are shifting elsewhere, fail to see the irony of proletarians, who once fought against the very process of industrialization, being among the last to wage a losing battle to preserve industrial capitalism.

## **Civilization In Crisis**

Civilization does appear to be in crisis, but this is a much more profound cycle than that of economic investment and decline. The runaway of technology is being felt; the entire species-being of humanity is threatened with extinction not only by the nuclear and biological disasters resulting from technological automatism, but by the eclipse of the human spirit and even of the potential for community and autonomy in the face of the internalization of mass society and total control.

Even five minutes of random television viewing will reveal that something terrifying is happening to the way in which human beings experience themselves and respond to life around them, that people no longer experience themselves even as “proletarians” but as increasingly privatized consumers of the mass products and messages of the megamachine. To the degree that they become the creatures of this world, they may rebel against the superficial conditions of their lives in the sense of protesting the distribution of the “rewards” of the machine, but they will be less and less capable of challenging the true material conditions of modern life, the organization of dependency, the technological automatism of science and development, and the forms of conditioning and remote control which are rendering human freedom a dim nostalgia. If there were no economic crisis at all, humanity would still face these grim prospects, would still confront the greatest crisis in our survival since our appearance on this planet.

Like many other forms of resistance to the megamachine, and as events in Poland have admirably demonstrated, workers’ struggles are certainly not irrelevant to the fight against domination. When people are in motion against any structures of domination, no matter how limited the scope of their struggle may be, certain previously unforeseen possibilities can present themselves. But unless these possibilities can be generalized into a culture which resists the mass death dance of social relations within technological civilization, no genuine freedom will be achieved. Unless these struggles can evolve into an emerging network of communities which create their own cultural identity and subsistence, whose forms of communication are founded upon human and moral values rather than technological motivations or production, there will only be a restructuring of capital which disempowers us more and removes us further from the sources of life. Unless we are willing to confront the entirety of this civilization and reclaim our humanity, we will be reduced to returning to the offices, high tech factories, and other institutions of mass society when the cycle of resistance is once more played out. And our capacity to break free from this prison house will become that much more doubtful.

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