

Anarchism & The Critique of Technology

Bob Brubaker

Much of contemporary anarchist thought is completely reconciled with industrial society and technological social organization. This common anarchist viewpoint is summed up by Daniel Guerin thusly: “[Anarchism] rests upon large-scale modern industry, up-to-date techniques, the modern proletariat, and internationalism on a world scale. In this regard it is of our times and belongs to the twentieth century.” (Daniel Guerin, *Anarchism*, p. 154) The optimism of many anarchists regarding the liberatory potential of modern technology was echoed by a student-worker action committee formed during the May, 1968 French uprising. The committee urged the formation of workers’ councils, federated with the councils of other companies on a regional, national, and international level. In the committee’s view, “worker management of business is the power to do better for everybody what the capitalists were scandalously doing for a few.” (George Katsiaficas, “The Meaning of May 1968,” *Monthly Review*, May 1978)

In *America by Design: Science, Technology and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism*, David Noble speaks for a viewpoint “far less sanguine about the emancipatory potential of modern technology.” Noble summarizes the judgment of Max Weber, and, more recently, Jacques Ellul, that technological progress has “generat[ed] a quiet...subtle transformation, weaving a paralyzing web of instrumentality. Not alone capitalism but the modern technical and administrative apparatus forged by capitalism [have] enslave[d] modern man.”

Nearly thirty years ago Camus (in *The Rebel*) raised this very point, quoting Simone Weil who two decades previously had argued that “one can abolish the opposition between the buyer and the seller of work without abolishing the opposition between those who dispose of the machine and those of whom the machine disposes.” Using Weil’s term “oppression by occupation” to describe the plight of the worker, Camus reasons that such oppression is integral to all industrial societies. “The political form of society is no longer in question at this level, but the beliefs of a technical civilization on which capitalism and socialism are equally dependent.” Camus excoriates “industrial socialism” for having “done nothing essential to alleviate the condition of the workers because it has not touched on the very principle of production and the organization of labor, which it has, on the contrary, extolled. It went so far as to offer the worker a historic justification of his lot of much the same value as a promise of celestial joy to someone who works himself to death; never did it attempt to give him the joy of creation.” Camus concludes that “any ideas which do not advance the solution of the problem hardly touch on the misfortune of the worker.”

Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* is one of the more important of the recent spate of books and articles touching on the degradation of the worker by the capitalist division of labor. In his review of Braverman’s book (in the Fall 1976 *Telos*), Russel Jacoby contends that its great value is in its refutation of the notion that socialism will simply inherit intact the productive apparatus of capitalist society. Braverman’s argument serves, in Jacoby’s words, to “demystify the labor process” by “uncover[ing] the ingression of capitalism into [its] very mechanics.” Domination is not merely a function of the abuse of the technical apparatus, but rather a function of its very existence. The laborer has been systematically stripped of control over the work process. The capitalist division of labor has disassociated knowledge and activity with the intent of asserting greater control over the worker. Moreover, assembly line work, as well as the infinite parcellation of tasks brought about with the adoption of Taylorism and the “scientific management of production” (not to speak of

the vast growth of bureaucratic “paper work”, which Lewis Mumford calls the most sterile form of work possible), have rendered much of work intolerably mindless and boring, suggesting that these developments will have to be completely undone if people are to reassert their creative capacities.

The domination of the individual by technological processes is by no means confined to the workplace. As David Noble observes, technology is a social process which shapes the entirety of people’s lives, restructuring social institutions and potentially redefining social relationships. Technology, however, is not an external force acting on society, but is “one important aspect of the development of society as a whole, and inevitably reflects [its] contours.”

Self-management is far too conservative a concept (in the literal sense of conserving too much of what needs to be destroyed) to be the foundation of a libertarian society. Langdon Winner points out in *Autonomous Technology* that “attachment to apparatus not only requires that men behave in certain ways, it also gives them a positive responsibility and criterion of performance they must meet.” The aggregate of this responsibility and performance demanded by modern society serves to embed the individual in a “web of instrumentality” which, no matter who “controls” it, defines the content of existence with “pathological completeness.”

Self-management preserves the existing universe of “needs” along with the forms of labor required to “satisfy” them. Completely accepted here is the productivist model of society articulated by Marxism. The human being is defined as a producer, who has a set of (ever-expanding) needs which the productive forces, utilized by a communist society, will be able to satisfy. However, we are entitled to ask, with Jean Baudrillard (in *The Mirror of Production*), whether this “phantom of production” haunting the revolutionary imagination does not represent a “wholly arbitrary convention, a simulation model bound to code all human material and every contingency of desire and exchange in terms of value, finality, and production?”

Doubtless the technocrats of the future will innocuously portray their enforced way of life as merely the “objective constraints” of social organization, or worse, as the positive content of freedom. But we are obliged to question the underlying assumptions of their viewpoint. To the extent that many anarchists have failed to undertake this questioning, they have been unable to sufficiently define the nature and functioning of authority in modern society, thereby rendering their critique abstract and ideological.

Web archive note: All brackets in print original.

fifth Estate

Bob Brubaker
Anarchism & The Critique of Technology

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/320-spring-1985/anarchism-the-critique-of-technology-2>
Fifth Estate #320, Spring, 1985

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net