

4th World War Against Native Peoples

More arguments for the elimination of technology

Mary Wildwood

a review of

In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology & the Survival of the Indian Nations. Jerry Mander. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco. 1991. \$25.00. 446 pp.

From my window overlooking Detroit's entropic landscape, no earth is visible. The ground is comprised of layers of pavement spread through eras over an anonymous "fill,"—dirt, roots, decimated bits of life systems, ripped out and hauled in long ago from some other abused place on Earth. This is the true landscape of the western spirit.

This is its history; this is the ground of its knowledge. Nothing is sacred. And its best intelligence lies in the detached skills of its own deconstruction, where its world and consciousness are analyzed into grateful oblivion, and nothing is understood. But beneath, in-between, at the edges, where the wasteland ends, native knowledge, though threatened, still thrives and reflects the fullness of the wild and teeming Earth, its teacher. This is where wisdom lives and grows, where there is so much to lose and so much to learn.

"There is no way to understand the situation of...native societies without understanding the outside societies that act upon them. And there is no way to understand the outside societies without understanding their relationship to native people."

It was with this awareness that Jerry Mander (author of *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*) decided to fuse into one what he had planned as two books, one a critique of technology, the other an update on the struggles of native peoples against the ongoing assault of state society. In so doing, he explicitly acknowledges the common motive force behind technological "development" and expansion, and native genocide all over the planet.

"The Indian problem today, as it always has been, is directly related to the needs of technological societies to find and obtain remotely located resources, in order to fuel an incessant and intrinsic demand for growth and technological fulfillment." And so we have *In the Absence of the Sacred: the Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations*, an important synthesis of voices opposing the Western technological machine with those defending indigenous cultures that lie in its path.

The book manages to convey the crucial perspectives of less widely read social critics like Mumford, Ellul, Sahlins, Turner and others into an argument consciously carried in anecdote, personal narrative and an often conversational style, so as to be accessible to a mass audience. In fact, its illustrative approach and practical layout make it appropriate for young people to read as a sort of counter-propaganda text.

Mander's means in this regard do not undermine the meaning; rather, they integrate the message more intimately into real life. And this, in fact, is in keeping with a significant aspect of the book's intent. That is, to emphasize observed living reality over the big advertisement of technopian promises, to show how, in direct contradiction to its ideological claims, with each technological "advance," people lose, and centralized power gains.

For instance, in the chapter focusing on computers, each fantastic computer industry claim is countered with responses from people within and around the industry. And plainly, computers which promise a "cleaner" technology, increased communication, greater "access" to knowledge, more brilliant people and more leisure time, and

freedom in general, actually cause more highly toxic pollution in their manufacture, radiation diseases, stress-related illnesses and more alienated work conditions in their operation (“the coal-mining of the ‘nineties,” as one worker put it), more bureaucratic shadow work, the further abstraction and quantification of a “knowledge” accessible only to those with the proper machine and the corresponding impoverishment of learning, a whole new network for powers of surveillance and centralized control, and aid in the acceleration toward global annihilation.

Mander takes this analysis a step further by showing how technology inserts itself as an imperative even among people working collectively to oppose its effects. He describes his experience at a conference of bioregionalists “working toward the disintegration of central political power,” where several participants advocated using computers to “build networks among the bioregions.” He points out the self-defeating direction of this logic that “fails to reckon with the intrinsic aspects of computers that will inevitably result in centralization.”

He argues, “It is profoundly naive for people who work to prevent planetary devastation to speak of the computer as if it were neutral; as if it were as useful for decentralization as it is to centralized development interests...computers set our movements back. We ought to begin dealing with them as an urgent environmental and political issue in themselves.”

Consistent with the personal nature of his argument, Mander begins the book by telling the story of technological expansion through his childhood in Yonkers, New York. He describes how the place’s rapid transformation from a walking-based, rural neighborhood to a car-oriented city block changed local face-to-face community relationships of distinctive character, into diffuse, standardized, primarily economic interactions.

The paradigm of progress was advertised as the American Dream in a new and growing system of corporate mass media that helped to lull him, his family and friends, and the American population into passive acceptance of its coercion. “Swept along by the rhetoric and hype, it was as though we found ourselves within a gigantic environmental theater. We sat and watched while they rolled away one diorama and replaced it with another and then another...while lifestyles were sharply altered, while the forest receded,...while pollution and smog became commonplace,...we watched as if it were a movie.”

From his own past, Mander moves outward to display the evidence of technological encroachment and assault all around us today; near and faraway, blatant and insidious. Its interlocking interests have multiplied and expanded to engender a global megatechnology which he defines as the “single technological economic web enclosing the planet.” And he stresses how its mass media induced blindness and passivity continue to be an integral strategy, augmenting technology’s acceleration toward total sensual alienation and its twin, planetary collapse.

Expanding his critique of television, Mander tells of his work with Dene Indian villages actively resisting the Canadian government’s imposition of TV into their communities because of its devastating impact on oral traditions and survival practices. The testimonies of Dene teachers and activists explain how television spreads ignorance, lethargy and dependence on the Canadian economy while propagating commercial desires and greedy values with slick and glamorous images of commodity life.

He recounts his family’s ominous visit to the brave new world of Disney’s EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow) Center in Florida.

Each spectacular high-tech display is actually an advertisement in the interests of the corporation financing it, such as Exxon, General Electric and Kraft. And a sanitized army of security is employed to enforce the illusion of what is in fact a “corporate projection of a utopian police state.”

Examples of the techno-corporate drive to commodify the wilderness culminate in reports of the scientific research now going on in the most prestigious American universities, provided with corporate funding and a platform from which to propagate its coolly psychotic rationale: genetic research for everything from the development of “designer babies” to military applications in genetic warfare, and plans for the “post-biological” age in the ultimate techno-fantasy of immortality—the removal of the mind from the brain, where a computer-surgeon “downloads” the contents of the human brain into a robot. And that’s just the first half of the book.

The second half shifts its focus to the indigenous communities struggling to fend off the ongoing invasion of technological society. And here Mander’s long-standing work and association with native activists is evident.

Through their voices, he endeavors to replace the damaging ignorance, myths and stereotypes resulting from present and historic misrepresentation about native people and the continuing assault on their cultures within the

U.S. and around the world. In this light, he devotes a chapter to warning against the complacent hypocrisy of the New Age movement, which feeds off the romantic stereotype of the “noble savage.”

Its practitioners appropriate only enough from native traditions to distract from the emptiness of lifestyles imposed by the same forces bent on destroying native communities. In its escapism, he says the movement “has assiduously avoided directly engaging in the actual lives and political struggles of the millions of descendants who carry on those ancient traditions...”

He gives an update of the U.S. government’s theft and desecration of tribal lands in places it has named Arizona, Alaska, Nevada and Hawaii. Then, quoting University of California at Berkeley Professor Bernard Nietschmann, he introduces an ambitious attempt to provide an overview of the “Fourth world” war, “hidden from most people’s view because the fighting is against people and nations that are not even on the map.”

That is to say, indigenous peoples who are actually swept into conflicts by the encroachment of state society are rarely identified in media by their own names, “instead they are referred to as rebels, separatists, extremists, insurgents, terrorists, tribal minorities or ethnic groups.” They are defined, in effect erased, by an alien geography superimposed by global economic interests. And the real nature of their struggles—against state-induced genocide, is effectively obscured.

The aggressors use tactics ranging from overt military coercion (often delegating the job to a surrogate local cultural or national group, or inciting conflict and land disputes between indigenous peoples with the imposition of arbitrary political boundaries and/or hegemony from the outside) to the more subtle but just as violent and culturally devastating neo-colonial strategies of legal economic domination. The unifying impetus behind this usurpation of land and power—for every corporate venture from mining to damming to deforestation, for every business from mass energy production to agribusiness to military bombing practice—is that it is waged in the interests of what was only recently but aptly termed “The New World Order.”

Interwoven among the specific accounts of this global assault are the individual voices of native peoples themselves. Of diverse region and experience, they express in common a sacred sense of kinship with and within their habitat that in its intricate processes is the source of knowledge and wisdom which endows self-respect and guides respectful behavior. This vision of the sensual-spiritual being wholly attuned to its ecology is intolerable to the megatechnical project that requires the complete objectification and standardization of nature and knowledge.

In the “Age of Information,” the potential of the individual human mind wanes in direct proportion to technology’s consumption and annihilation of natural processes and the native communities which understand and maintain them. In the face of this earth-centered awareness, grounded in millennia of intimate observation and participation within the chaotic patterns of the wild, the critical, often disastrous inadequacy of the very concept of knowledge in “educated” societies is exposed: “a fast-paced, objective, abstract, quantitative kind of knowledge.”

Mander quotes anthropologist Milton M.R. Freeman’s account of what happened when Canadian wildlife managers imposed their scientifically informed methods over traditional Inuit caribou hunting practices against the arguments of the hunters themselves. The result was a sharp drop in the formerly abundant caribou population. This occurred because the Canadian wildlife managers, in a merely quantitative approach, calculated a standard number and size of animal to be killed within each herd. The Inuit hunters, however, understanding the caribou in their complex relationships as a social group, explained that the older, larger members (which the managers designated as open game) possess the experience, strength and calming influence crucial to the survival of the whole herd.

This instance, one among many, is emblematic not only of the impoverishment of genuine knowledge in the technological society, eclipsed as it is with the proliferation of data. The story also shows how the deadly cycle of the techno-fix does not originate with an altruistic attempt at “problem-solving”—the myth that propagates the cycle (e.g., imposition of soil-depleting and -poisoning agribusiness techniques on African natives suffering famine because imposition of cash-crop economy destroyed subsistence farming). There is no “problem” to begin with.

As Mander says of the introduction of computers into “forest management,” the real objective is to “more efficiently account for them as resources,...to better develop them as part of commodity society.”

All these stories argue not only that the preservation of traditional native knowledge and practice is basic to the survival of native communities. They also indicate that only by abandoning the profit-motivated technological

paradigm, to learn from the sound local wisdom of indigenous peoples and live by it, will humans in general have a chance to survive on this earth.

Of course, the renewal of ecological relationships requires a profound transformation in social relationships. Our connections with each other must shift from those imposed and administered by a market economy and disproportionately huge entities of state power to relationships reintegrated into the surrounding ecology with localized decision-making based on commonly held values of respect for people and habitat.

Mander handles this issue of social transformation indirectly by way of discussing “The Great Binding Law of the Iroquois Confederacy... designed to form a peaceful federation among five previously separate, disputatious Indian nations,” and its influence on the drafting of the U.S. Constitution. He outlines the parallels between the decision-making processes of the Great Law and those provided for in the Constitution. But even by Mander’s own account, the similarities are primarily abstract and are far outweighed by the real differences.

At its inception, the U.S. represented a capitalist government run by rich, white men, elected by propertied, white men, whose individual perspectives were reduced to a single vote and the will of the majority, and where, then as now, “the most apocalyptic decisions, especially military ones, are always made by government, quickly—almost secretly—without consulting the people.” But the Iroquois confederation, had “no executive branch, no rulers or presidents,” and reserved for women the responsibility of nominating the changing spokespersons who were expected to “prove themselves wise, honest, and worthy of confidence.” Iroquois decision-making aspired to build “deliberately slow” consensus. In what way can we call both of these societies “democratic” and not render the term meaningless?

Though Mander does not emphasize this point, the Iroquois tribes, by deciding to form a large-scale confederation (the real reasons for this are still debated by Western historians) put at risk the individual autonomy practiced in their smaller tribal groups. But it is likely that because they were raised as respected, autonomous, cooperative beings, the tribes’ federated procedures were still guided by the values of personal autonomy respective of the whole. This sensitivity on the part of the Iroquois people is also indicated in their awareness of the compromising distortions inherent in translating the Great Law from their own oral tradition to written English text. And it implies a wholistic intelligence which the “founding fathers” were incapable of grasping.

Deeply alienated, the newcomers appropriated only enough external fragments from the Great Law to hide from their victims and (in some ways) themselves the pattern of domination they still perpetrated. On the one hand, the author-politicians were stealing from the native world vision; on the other hand, they were attempting to assassinate it. In this sense, *The Gift of Democracy* was never given, and never received.

The clearer and deeper message regarding genuine social change is conveyed in Mander’s story about his meeting with Hopi Kikmongwiis in the 1960s, to request permission to make a film about the strip mining of sacred sites on Hopi land. He describes the elders’ long slow process of consensus as a “peeling away of layers of consideration until nothing but a clear agreement remained.”

Speaking was in quiet thoughtful tones, without tactics of persuasion. The emphasis was on listening: “Sometimes they seemed to be asleep, but...there is among oral cultures a unique way of listening and remembering. They were not asleep; they were alert in a way that was difficult for me to see.”

It is true that traditional native communities provide models for healthy social interaction. But what must be learned is not merely the apparent arrangements and procedures, but the awareness that informs them and unfolds outward. It must be learned wholly (holy, sacred), which requires careful listening and remembering.

The book closes with a defiant sense of hopefulness, calling for individual and collective action, with a consciousness that merges regional resistance to local instances of the megatechnical assault, with personal participation in the defense of native communities, and includes a list of groups and information sources to this effect.

Here in Detroit, it is springtime and weeds are breaking through the pavement, reminding us that somewhere beneath our feet the Earth regenerates itself. Aligned with the native spirit, we recognize the sacred ground. It inspires our struggles to protect it, and in the process, to be thoughtful with each other and listen very well.

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