

# Techno Madness

an overview

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We live in a technological life-world, more so by the hour. Our ecology is now all too largely technology, which has been irreversible, directional, and cumulative. The process that now characterizes civilization is a generalized technicization. Its success is measurable by how totally it has insinuated itself into society and into our consciousness—with grave consequences.

Raymond Tallis put it well: “Once technology penetrated every aspect of life and the model of rationality that it exemplified entered human and social relations, the ‘disenchantment of the world’ (to use Max Weber’s famous phrase) was inevitable.”<sup>1</sup> Those who see Capital and the State as the only villains to be overcome are very much in the dark.

There are institutions more foundational than those two; first, and most basic, is division of labor. The first specialists represented a gradient of power in society, a pre-political type of effective authority. Specialization is the core feature of the march of technology, always strengthening the dominant order while weakening the individual. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Emile Durkheim, the so-called father of sociology, saw division of labor as furthering “organic solidarity,” or community.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it increases domestication, separation, and hierarchy. Durkheim’s utter error in this regard is rivaled only by Marx’s notion that herding people into factories—the temples of division of labor and domestication—makes them a revolutionary force.

Early on, Marx insisted that the division of labor must be undone, for the divided self, as well as divided society, to be healed. Later, siding with industrial technology, he abandoned that perspective.<sup>3</sup> A fateful choice of values.

In today’s world of massified and ever-deepening alienation, we endure the results of tech’s triumph. Undergirding this structure is the belief that technology will always improve nature, as if nature itself is constructed like a technological device. IBM’s long-running advertising mantra comes to mind: “Let’s Build a Smarter Planet.” More and more technology. And yet environmental catastrophe is arriving.

It is common knowledge that today’s global climate crisis was initiated by technology’s great leap forward, the Industrial Revolution. Each increase in earth’s over-heating corresponds to an increase in industrialization.

Many continue to claim that the meaning or value of technology is determined solely by how it is used. In itself, the argument runs, technology is neutral, merely a tool to be used for good or ill. But this view is false. Every tool, every technology embodies certain values and choices, beyond its actual uses. Simple tools, which don’t involve much or any division of labor, embody traits like flexibility and intimacy. Technological systems, which involve considerable specialization, are standardizing and distancing. The use to which something is put, while important, is secondary to what the thing is.

Some apply a values yardstick to a particular technology, as critique and/or safeguard. Gandhi, for example, represented such ‘primitive’ values as simplicity and self-reliance; he held that technology (e.g. industrialization) is acceptable if it respects those values. But this is akin to saying that cancer is OK, if it respects the host body. The logic of cancer and the logic and nature of technology are equivalent.

Martin Heidegger saw technology dominating everything, mobilizing everything to its own purposes, and ultimately obliterating everything—including thought. There was always some ambiguity, though, as Bernard Stiegler has pointed out.<sup>4</sup> Heidegger's late call for a "free relation" to technology seemed to say that technology is not the problem, rather our attitude or consciousness with respect to technology. As if the two can be separated; as if values and choices do not inhere in technology itself. Division of labor is not a category of mind, but a reality in the actual world, with tangible consequences. As is domestication, technology's next qualitative advance.

Karl Jaspers traveled a somewhat similar road, moving away from his earlier diagnosis of technology's "demonism"<sup>5</sup> to the spurious claim that it is, after all, merely a neutral means.

More recently, the leftist Alain Badiou characterized Heidegger's (admittedly limited) critique of technology as "uniformly ridiculous," and called for the unleashing of much more tech into the world.<sup>6</sup>

Donna Haraway has posited technology as key to overcoming patriarchy. We must embrace the inevitable merging of human and machine, thereby transcending gender differences. This is the gist of her well-known "Cyborg" thesis of the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> More recently, she has continued to uphold the basics of the technosphere; e.g. domestication is "an emergent process of cohabiting,"<sup>8</sup> and "machines can be...friendly selves,"<sup>9</sup> technology is "not the enemy," etc.<sup>10</sup> Not far from the unhealthy transhumanists' fantasies.

"The internet is the great masterpiece of human civilization," announced M.I. Franklin.<sup>11</sup> In civilization, achievement is more and more a technological matter. Technology now makes the claims that, since, the Enlightenment, were the province of politics. The bright vista of Enlightenment, rational and tolerant Progress, has dimmed altogether. Political projections have failed, and technology fills the vacuum. It tells us, via constant mass media, that technology is a cornucopia of variety and difference. But we live in the most standardized world that has ever existed. Technology claims to empower us, but have we ever been so disempowered?

Technology connects us. Which is savagely mocked by the reality of a landscape without community, one of loneliness, isolation, disappearing social ties. From which lethal pathologies emerge: mass shootings, rising suicide rates, and the opioid epidemic, among others.

Destiny Domesticated: The Rebirth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Technology, by Jos de Mul (2014) is, sadly, very much to the point. Tragedy meaning fate, the "fateful character of technology."<sup>12</sup> As humans become ever more deskilled and dependent, one can see a surrender to the techno-world, to the totality of this global civilization. But there has always been resistance. We are seeing some signs of pushback, as technology's unavoidable consequences are borne in on all of us.

## Notes

1 Raymond Tallis, *The Knowing Animal: A Philosophical Inquiry into Knowledge and Truth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 282.

2 Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 1997 [1893]).

3 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1997 [1966]).

4 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 7–8.

5 Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957 [1931]).

6 Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 53, 54.

7 The cyborg model/destination was a hit with postmodernists, always interested in blurring distinctions, in this case between human and machine. Lorenzo Simpson's, *Time, Technology and the Conversations of Modernity* (1995) shows that at base, postmodernism is a function of tech dominance. At the 2001 "Taking Nature Seriously" conference (University of Oregon), Haraway told me that I'll get nowhere as an "angry prophet" outside the system. That I must be a part of it and "play the game."

8 Donna J. Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 122.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 61

10 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 3.

11 M.I. Franklin, *Digital Dilemmas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 16.

12 Jos de Mul, *Destiny Domesticated: The Rebirth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Technology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014).

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