What is Society?

John Zerzan

2026

It is hard to imagine a world without accelerating technology as its reality. A fantasy to see society as other than in its dizzying orbit. This dimension is one of isolation in which the goal is "an experience different from and potentially better than face-to-face interaction," wrote tech enthusiasts Hollan and Stornetta as far back as 1992.

Industrialism brought mass society which devoured community. The tech juggernaut deepened this separation immeasurably.

And, what is the nature of society at its base; its ground zero? French philosopher Jean Baudrillard proclaimed it to be simulation. Simulacra and representations are paramount. Reality is a copy for which there is no longer an original. Baudrillard was light on specifics, but did not examine technology. Had he lived past 2007, he would have witnessed more of the full force of the meaning of the technosphere. But it's doubtful that he would have gotten down to brass tacks. That was not his very postmodern style.

Situationist founder Guy Debord beat Baudrillard to the punch by about a decade. The first thesis of his 1967 *Society of the Spectacle* declares in the first sentence, "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation."

Immanuel Kant, godfather of the Enlightenment 200 years before Baudrillard, might be seen as his opposite. Kant espoused the rational autonomous subject, operating in a stable reality, whereas Baudrillard overturned all that. But Kant also told us that the world is thinkable, though not directly knowable.

Our mental categories provide the mediated knowledge. As pioneering German sociologist Georg Simmel put it, "What a thing this man did to the world by declaring it to be a representation!" Not a perfect fit, but an early version of Baudrillard's simulacra epistemology.

Returning to the technosphere, psychologist Peter Hancock concludes that "we have built a global society whose dependence on technology grows daily." In his estimation, "our ecology is technology."

Geoff Mulgan, a professor of collective intelligence, reviewing histories of technologies, found that "it usually takes at least 50 to 60 years for them to diffuse throughout a society and economy." As he was writing this in *Connexity* in 1998, the arrival of personal computers, smartphones and AI cut his time frame in half. This techno-momentum has put its imprint on society with dazzling speed, while technology has largely been seen as both neutral and autonomous in its development. In other words, inevitable.

That assessment is far from true. Daily life is increasingly automated and programmed. To the point, according to American writer and journalist Nicholas Carr, "we've designed a system that discards us."

Technology as Experience is John McCarthy and Peter Wright's 2004 offering. Even the title is a lie. Technological "experience" is supposedly open, unfinished, promising. But the results of technology are sterile, synthetic, standardized. So very unpromising, as society grows colder and sadder. Isolation spreads. Society is less and less social.

A basic target for us must be technology, the physical actuality of a dying civilization. We must fight for life, for community. There are flickers of light: the Lamp Club in New York City and other Luddite groups. Let's grow them.

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Fifth Estate #418, Summer 2026

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