

The Technological System (Essay)

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29 December, 2021

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The amount of genuine leisure available in a society is generally in inverse proportion to the amount of labour-saving machinery it employs.

E.F. Schumacher

Man... attempts to create the world in his image, to build a totally man-made environment, and then discovers that he can do so only on the condition of constantly remaking himself to fit it. We now must face the fact that man himself is at stake.

Ivan Illich

...those who use cunning tools become cunning in their dealings, and that those who are cunning in their dealings have cunning in their hearts, and that those who have cunning in their hearts... are restless in spirit, and that those who are restless in spirit are not fit vehicles for Tao. It is not that I do not know of these [tools you wish me to use]. I should be ashamed to use them.

Chuang Tzu

Most people don't know, and don't want to know, what the real problem with the world is. Their attention is hopelessly narrow-minded, focused on a range of secondary effects. They worry about the despoliation of the wild, techofascist mission creep, the criminalisation of gender, preposterous inequality, the state of the youth, rising prices and so on, but ignore what all these things have in common. It's like someone who never washes and, rather than deal with this, spends his life fretting about his itchy skin, oily hair and fungal infections, buying medications to deal with these second-order effects and finding ways to ingratiate himself with people who are offended by his smell.

So it is with the wider world. When it comes to the problems we face as a society, it's not just that ordinary people cannot see the wood for the trees, they are *terrified* of the wood and *hypnotised* by the trees, transfixed by the *isolated* ills that face them and afraid of tearing their attention away from them. This is not an intellectual bias, but a deep-seated unconscious fear of grasping a truth so immense, so awful, that to do so would annihilate everything they've built their lives on.

Some people might, at this point, think I'm setting them up to identify 'The Problem' as the 'New World Order', or some such other shady group of villains; that, in other words, you are about to read a 'conspiracy theory'. Personally, I've got nothing against investigating the role that Big Money plays in shaping the world, or in exposing the agendas of people like George Soros or Bill Gates, or in understanding how corporations, states and — the real power players — investment companies and banks, operate. All of this can of course throw light on our parlous situation.

Nor am I averse to analysing the nature of that great modern bogeyman, 'capitalism'. Despite the fact that socialism and communism are part of the system, and ultimately

support it, we *do* live in a world built on capital, on private ownership of the means of production, and we *do* live in a world in which wage-slavery and debt-slavery, the twin-pillars that capitalism is built on, have made, thanks to the efforts of our owners and creditors, a wasteland of the earth. This is why, despite the disastrous limitations and inherently tyrannous nature of socialism and communism, the Marxist tradition has a great deal of teach us.

But. Neither Globalist Supermen nor the capitalist wing of the system is the cause of our ills, any more than ‘immigrants’ are, or ‘my parents’ are, or ‘snowflakes’ are, or ‘communism’ is, or ‘Trump’ is, or ‘the devil’ is, and people who think such isolated, secondary effects *are* causally ‘behind it all’, who spend their lives exclusively focused on attacking capitalism, on zeroing in on the oligarchs or billionaires or banks or whatever Baddie they have chosen, are ensuring that, at best, the *real* problem passes them by.

Here we might make special mention of ‘the left’, that group of people who pour their energies into getting a fairer wage for Bangladeshi sempstresses, defending minority interests, promoting what they call ‘democracy’, trying to save the sea-plankton, criticising the American military juggernaut and battling away at greedy, ‘undemocratic’ landowners. Not that any of these aren’t real threats, but that, overall, attacking these targets draws fire away from the real source of our troubles; which is why leftism (in *all* its forms) is the *most* effective means by which the system can protect and perpetuate itself.

Obviously ‘the right’ aren’t any closer to seeing things clearly either, obsessed as they are with controlling the uncontrollable (the people, the weather, the market), excluding the unexcludable (minorities, foreigners, women), hoovering up every last shekel on the planet and trying to return to a world that is lost forever. The left and the right are perpetually at odds about how to go about organising society, constantly criticising each other — the left focusing on the monstrous greed and small-mindedness of the right and the right on the moral hypocrisy and individuality-annihilating blandness of the left — but *neither* of them are even slightly interested in the real problem and when confronted by a threat *to* the real problem, they forget their differences and instantly unite to crush it.

So what *is* The Real Problem? What *is* the ‘woods’ that so very few people can look at squarely and which is, ultimately, behind all the terrible ‘trees’ that they target? What *is* that which both the right and the left serve, which runs their lives and ours? What *is* the cause of the horror we see around us — and feel within us — and that, many of us now know for sure, can only get worse? It is the technological system, and it is the human ego which built and maintained it. I’ll restate that. The horror, the nightmare world we live in, which is set to get worse and worse and worse, is the result of the unnatural technological system we have built, and, deeper than that, the ego which built and which continues to maintain and defend it. Until this is understood and acted upon, we will get nowhere, either collectively or individually.

By ‘the technological system’ I mean the unnatural industrial-technological world-machine that surrounds us. The ‘hardware’ of this machine is the world of iron and steel, coal and oil, plastic and polycarbon, copper wire and fibreoptics, diode and microprocessor, box-ship and plane, computer and smartphone, road and rail, and so on. It is the mind-made *substance* of modernity which surrounds us; all the engines, factories, instruments, computers and various tools of the world. The ‘software’ of the machine is all the modern institutions we are familiar with — the prisons, schools, universities, law courts, offices and so on — and the information these organisations ‘run on’ — the ideas, ideologies, theories and beliefs required to keep it all going; all the *intangible* organisations and organisational processes which operate the tools of the world, and all the facts required to build, maintain and justify them.

For many thousands of years, even until quite recently, it was possible to escape from the reach of the technological system, but eventually, over thousands of years, and after many setbacks and cracks, through which free people were once able to slip it all ‘came together’. This final consolidating process began in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with a massive lurch forwards in the power of the ‘software’ of the system, then, in the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in its ‘hardware’. Finally, around fifty years ago, all barriers towards a complete world system were lifted and we hurtled towards the state we are in now, standing before the doors of a complete technological dystopia, one so pervasive and invasive it literally inhabits the psyche of those who are part of it, such that it becomes, to machine people, meaningless to *speak* of freedom. Freedom from what? The prison and the prisoner have become one.

Now, it is *critical* to understand that although, as I’ve said, there *are* people who are responsible for all this — the owners of the system, particularly, but also its management class, its academics, doctors, priests, journalists and so on — and although such people *should* (and will) be held to account for their monstrous violence and cowardice, the system itself is, to a significant degree, *autonomous*. It has its own objective priorities and demands which its human servants *must* obey or be crushed.

To take a recent example, why is the communications technology of the developed world being upgraded to ‘5G’? Nobody really needs it, nobody really wants it, except perhaps a few technolotrous lunatics. The internet works fine — too well in fact; but we certainly don’t need it to be a hundred times faster. So who does need it? We can certainly say that tech companies do, who depend on continual ‘innovation’ for their power and profits, and we can certainly say that states do, who need hyperfast internet systems to more more easily monitor and control their citizens. But the most important thing to understand is that *ultimately* the development of the technological system *itself* ‘requires’ 5G. As the system becomes more and more complex, more and more invasive and, consequently, more and more destructive, its communication systems require more and more power — which is why it *must* have 5G. Then as soon as one state or institution adopts this technology, and more ‘perfectly’ controls

its environment through it, so *everyone* must immediately do the same to prevent themselves being overwhelmed.

Technology has worked this way since it first took control of human affairs, many thousands of years ago. Every time a foundational tool or process has developed to the point that it has become too powerful or complex for individual human beings (or local communities) to control, it has forced a complete change in society in order to accommodate the change. When, for example, one aspect of British society industrialised — cotton factories — a vast number of attendant aspects had to be industrialised; because you can't have machine-fabrics without machine-power, machine-transport and machine-minds. Every step of every 'progress' requires an accompanying development in every other technology — not to mention in the thoughts, feelings and lifestyles of the people who must use or be subjected to the use of these technologies. This leads to all kinds of unforeseen problems which then require more technological fixes.

Such problems today include the immense swollen power of tech companies and of bureaucrats, the annihilation of the wild, the predominance of domesticated herd-rule (aka 'democracy'), the death of culture (and of nuance), the ruin of children and the corruption of innocence, the humiliation of the spoken-word, the decay of community and conviviality, the annihilation of human dignity (particularly as can be found through meaningful artistic-artisanal work), the whole lockdown-vaccine-vaccine-passport process, the tyrannous behaviour of our institutions and the hollow, purposeless, futility of modern existence.

All of this is ultimately a result of the technological system. Right-wing owners make critical decisions, as do left-wing managers; but it is the system itself which commands them. People complain about the withering away of traditional values, about the rise in crime, about their heart-dead children, about their stressful lives, about the blasted immigrants buying up the town, about police violence and racism, about the poor quality of goods and services and about the maddening frustration of trying to get through to someone who can help them, and then they seize on the next most immediate cause of these things, without realising that they are *all* because they live in a machine which *inevitably* produces all these results.

To take another example, immigration. For the past century the technological system has *demand*ed that huge numbers of people shuttle around the world; and so they do. That so many ordinary people don't like to have the places they live in overwhelmed with foreigners, or their families fragmented and their traditions diluted, is neither here nor there. The technological system needs it, so everyone must put up with it. This is why when the system started to need the mass-movement of people, 'tolerance', 'diversity' and 'inclusiveness' became religiously important and why 'racism' — which here refers to forms of social complaint — took on the status devil worship did in medieval times.

Or take another example, the utter destruction of childhood innocence and freedom — and therefore sanity. Again, the technological system demands it. It *must* have children rigidly schooled in its procedures and values, and it *must* now have them

engaging with ‘society’ through the screen. This, combined with parents’ terror of the real world and a social premium on ‘non-violent’ permissiveness — both of which are also consequences of the technological system — combine to create the sickly, cultureless, egomaniacal laboratory monkeys we once called our children.

Plastic is another example of ‘technological necessity’. For the past century the technological system has *demande*d that we build our entire world from plastic, with catastrophic consequences. Plastic slowly degrades into tiny particles which saturate the things we use, our food and water and the air we breathe and have been shown to act as vectors for a wide array of contaminants, including pesticides, persistent organic pollutants, heavy metals, and antibiotics. These particles, which are chronically toxic (nuerotoxic, genotoxic, hepatotoxic) and carcinogenic, are then absorbed by biota tissue, organs, and even cells, causing an absolutely unbelievable range of illnesses, the degradation of soil fertility and the destruction of the wild. What choice did we have in all this? None.

Or let’s consider social control. Most Western countries are headed, via vaccine (or food rationing) passports, towards a Chinese social-credit type society, in which citizens, rated for how trustworthy or contagious they are, are automatically disciplined and controlled through invasive systems of surveillance. Even in China this system is in its infancy; the techno-dystopian horrors to come — digital currencies, smart-passes to move, automated ‘security’ systems, the final abolishment of any kind of physical community — will be far, *far* worse, extinguishing the human spirit for good. Why? At this stage only lunatics, morons and cowards believe it is for our *health*. But neither is it happening, *ultimately*, because Machiavellian demon-men are consciously designing a world of living death. Once again, there *are* such monsters at the top of the Pyramid of Evil, and they *do* have significant control over banks, investment companies and the like, and they *will* get what’s coming to them, but all this is happening, and must happen, because a technofascist prisonworld is what the technological system *itself* demands. The supermachine is *inherently* unstable, unnatural and anti-human, which means the more powerful it becomes, the more rigidly it *must* control things (and turn people *into* controllable things) to keep it all together.

Or there’s the mind-numbing booorrredom of modern life, its total absence of adventure, mystery and surprise. Once again, this is a requirement of the machine, which cannot operate in an environment of unpredictable danger or irrational ineffability. Everything which does not fit, which cannot be rationalised into a discrete thing, which cannot, thereby, be managed, must be levelled out by a machine system. Everyone feels the pain of living in a boring dystopia, right the way up the ladder, but all who work within the system are helpless to do anything about it, because allowing things to go haywire, allowing the kind of free spontaneity which leads to the wild, adventurous uncertainty we all (despite ourselves) crave or allowing people to work slowly and carefully to create mysterious fractal beauty; all this disrupts the rational ordering of society, sending ripples of fear through the boring monsters who own and manage it.

This is why everyone everywhere, with astonishingly few exceptions, looks as if they are stuck in a traffic jam.

Or — do you need another example? I've got a lot more — consider Artificial Intelligence, which is rapidly turning social life into an inhuman nightmare. Artificial Intelligence is, as the name proclaims, artificial; it is not real. It is, unlikely natural, embodied, human intelligence, innately unempathic, innately hyper-rational and innately *ruthless*. Its decisions cannot even be described as 'cold', as there is no possible feeling, or consciousness, which it can betray. If you push the wrong button, or add the wrong file, or are late by one second, you fail, you lose. On top of this, the hyper-complexity of artificial intelligence guarantees constant failure and error and the growth of this complexity — along with its omnipresent invasiveness — ensures that these errors become more and more horrific. But nobody is to blame; AI is being introduced *everywhere* because it *has* to be introduced. The system *cannot* allow real intelligence to operate; it is too slow, too generous, too disordered, too costly.

Or there's 'the woman problem' — that's what feminism was called when it first appeared in the nineteenth century, when industrialisation forced women to enter male domain, where they faced a radically different form of subjugation to that they had known. Prior to industrialisation women often had as much power as men; contributing to the wealth of the household and controlling its expenses. When they found themselves in the novel and unpleasant situation of being ordered around in their work, they responded with 'feminism'. This 'feminism' was then used by the system, over the century and a half which followed, to coerce women into an economy which they had and still have absolutely zero *meaningful* power over. The only 'power' they could obtain was that offered to those who crawled their way up the mountain of excrement called 'career', a process which corrupted or compromised the femininity it was supposed to liberate. Finally, as the technological system overcame the whole self, not just gender but sex *itself* was abolished, sexual difference being a barrier to the undifferentiated, bodiless ghosts the virtual system demands. The technological system, in other words, created 'the woman problem' and solved it by *effacing woman*.

Or there's the philosophy and cultural trend known as 'postmodernism', which rejects all limits, all barriers and all distinctions, which justifies or actively promotes the dissolution of cultural boundaries, which celebrates the end of sex and of gender, which effaces the difference between childhood and adulthood, or between the public sphere and the private domain, and which makes all discernment, between good and evil, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, truth and falsehood, life and death, and love and hate, meaningless. The ideological industry had to manufacture this justifying philosophy because the software of the machine world demands complete permeability of form. Form—what we might call manifest meaning—must be 'free' to meet the machine's operative demands of the moment without being constrained by, say, the embodied mystery of femininity, the place-specific quality of natural culture, the innocence of childhood, the demands of craft or a morality rooted in actual experience. Postmodernism even collapses the membranes which keep modern institutions apart,

liquefying the school, the hospital, the court and the factory and recombining them into an omni-centre that automatically ‘governs’ all aspects of human ‘life’.

The postmodern horrorshow both justifies and perpetuates the complete destruction of sensate culture. We now live in a shredded social wasteland, in which human relations have been replaced by monetised simulations which can be autonomously managed in the same way that a bank account or a character in a game can. Human virtues, such as empathy, sociability, loving kindness and justice have no place in the virtual condition, *because they cannot and must not*. Intricate natural complexity (or ‘fractality’), sensation which incites reverie, which slows consciousness down, which frees it from emotionally potent stimulation, which is difficult, which requires intelligence and sensitivity to makes sense of — all of this must be banished from experience, from urban and virtual environments. Only those attributes and non-experiences which serve the system are allowed to thrive; technical skill, narcissistic apathy, absolute egoism, restless, painless abstraction and numbed passivity. Result? People are going out of their minds. Depression, anxiety and schizoid insanity are now *everywhere*.

Another cause of the psychological misery we are surrounded by is that people are becoming redundant. I don’t mean they are losing their jobs — which would be a reason to celebrate — I mean they are becoming useless, superfluous, not just unable to do anything with any skill, but unable to contribute in any meaningful way to society and punished for even trying. This inevitably leads to ghastly feelings of futility and depression, which people are encouraged to assign to all kinds of reasons (chiefly ‘mental illness’) but the real one; the technological system, which *must* expel as many humans as possible from its operations or, if that’s not possible, expel genuinely human qualities — such as creativity, generosity, fellow-feeling and so on — from the people who remain within it. Such qualities cannot be controlled and, more often than not, disrupt the smooth operation of the machine, so they cannot be allowed, which is why only machine-people rise to the top in the technological system; unempathic, cowardly, hyper-rational, automatons.

Owners and managers might occasionally have some need for beauty in their lives, they might value spontaneity and generosity, they might love wild nature, they might have all kinds of human qualities. It’s unlikely there will be many such qualities or they will be of much profundity — for it’s the ‘least among us’ who lead — but there might be *something* good *somewhere* in there. The system, however, has no use for the good. None. Radical beauty, innocence and honesty, integrity and decency, genuine originality, thoughtless generosity, ungovernable wildness, unconditional love are all *threats* to the smooth running of the machine, which is why all these things are vanishing from our lives.

All the problems I have mentioned — all the horrendous miseries we face in the world — are a direct or indirect consequence of living within and being forced to serve, in the widest sense (including the technocratic financial and legal systems), the technological system. But so few people can see this, because to really, fully see it is to expose their egoic addiction *to* the system. They want to end lockdowns or biofascism

or the destruction of the wild or the abuse of women — and that’s all fine, but it’s like a doctor who wants to treat your cancer and prescribes painkillers to deal with it. Who wouldn’t support the doctor? who wouldn’t take the painkillers? But unless we deal with the *root* cause of the cancer, the personal and collective cause, the cancer will *always* plague us.

Consider the following story. An insecure man — let’s call him Tom — greedy for wealth and power, takes a stressful job in the middle of a city. Tom has no access to wild nature, no community around him to speak of — just work colleagues and a partner — and he is working flat-out at an essentially pointless task in the city, with no free time to discover and pursue interests which are meaningful. He is completely dependent on an army of specialist strangers to feed, clothe, transport, entertain and protect him, and on an immeasurably complex technological system to communicate with his society; which, actually, is no longer a society at all, but a series of algorithms masquerading as a society. After ‘living’ like this for a decade or so, Tom gets sick and unhappy and starts to deal with his sickness and his mental health problems. He gets stomach pains, so he takes painkillers or alters his diet; he feels stressed, so he meditates or goes on holiday; he is bored, so he watches a movie or gets high; he is lonely so he uses social media or sees a prostitute; he is angry, so he criticises the government or goes on a march... and so on. All the problems are seen in isolation. At no point does he identify the technological system as the problem. Why? Because the prison and the prisoner are one.

I’ve chosen here rather a crude example, one that some readers will no doubt dismiss as just one of ‘them’, but everyone within the technological system is attached to it in much the same manner, from the most aggressively independent right-wing businessman to the most groovy, eco-radical leftist author, from the wealthiest billionaire, at the pinnacle of the techno-pyramid, through all the intellectuals, thinkers and professionals, down to the ordinary workers and the poor. All are plugged in, to their roots, which is why so many people, from all classes of society, are disturbed by *genuine* independence. The socialist who wants ‘a fairer society’ or ‘an eco-friendly city’ or a ‘civilised world’ — we might not like such people, but we understand them. The madman who does not *want* a society, a city, a civilisation; this is the devil’s work.

All man’s egoic insecurities and cravings, his docile conformity and numbed passivity, his restless need for stimulation are plugged in, at every point, to the technological system, manifesting as his whole life. He cannot see the big picture, because to see it means that *everything* must change. Not just this or that activity or habit, but *everything*, his whole being and, consequently, his whole way of life. So he goes on identifying this or that problem and pursuing this or that isolated, short-term solution, until he dies.

Those who own and manage the system well know that people are like this, and so they make sure that problems are presented without context and that solutions amount to nothing more than relieving immediate fears and stresses, all but ensuring that the passive mass are all together caught up in the panic of the day and all too

willing to sacrifice more of their freedom and dignity for a short term fix; a little less fear, a little less insecurity. This is how evil grows, by offering the lesser of two evils until all the good has gone.

None of this means that men and women weren't or aren't capable of being greedy, selfish or stupid before or outside the technological system, nor that those men and women who are independent of the system to any significant degree are necessarily paragons of virtue. What it means is that, naturally, selfishness has its limits; it is restrained by the people around us and by the limitations of the society around us, which prevent selfishness from ruining our lives or those of our fellows. When the unnatural system reaches the size, extent, invasiveness and power of the modern world, there is no limit to how much the ego can feed from or be fed by it.

What I mean is that opportunities for addiction, escapism, irresponsibility and so on are virtually limitless in the the fully developed system. Not only that, but the power of the system to pander to the ego, to flatter its vanities, excuse its fears and feed its baser impulses makes it almost impossible for men and women to resist its insidious creep into their lives. The system — by offering constant micro-hits of social-media fame, by rewarding failure, by lulling men and women to sleep with central heating, smartphones, video games, antidepressants, Pringles and endless porn, by rewarding those who comply, who bend over, who are obedient and subservient, by making it impossible to ever fully confront pain, dirt, loss or hard work, by rebranding self-love, conceit, cowardice and spite as mental illnesses or even as laudable values and by making love completely unnecessary — all this, along with the various illusory myths that the system furnishes its addicts with (chiefly that there was a lower quality of life in the pre-civilised, or even pre-modern, age), lets the selfish ego entirely off the hook which, as spoilt children everywhere testify, turns us all into monstrous egomaniacs, pitiful cowards and craven addicts.

Completely rejecting the system might seem like an entertaining idea, but when voicing your doubts — much less doing something about them — threatens your bank balance or your job, suddenly 'prudence' and 'caution' are required. This is why almost nobody can see the wood for the trees, because to do so, in the advanced system, means to completely reject a parasitical false self which has so overwhelmed consciousness that nothing else — no other quality — can be experienced. An inability to see the woods, to see the true cause of the world's ills is not a question of intelligence and certainly not of taste or education — usually the most educated are the most morally blind and the most tasteless and uneducated the most perceptive, at least when it comes to seeing the true nature of the system. Men and women do not turn away from the truth of the world because they cannot intellectually understand it, or through some kind of error or blindness. They turn away because to see the nature of the technological system is, for the ego, to look straight into its own death; because it must die to be free.

Fortunately the system is dying, as all things do. It too is reaching its limits (imposed on it by its energy requirements, which exponentially outstrip cheap supply). This, like

the much-vaunted ‘end of work’ that is also coming down the tubes, would be a cause for celebration were it not for the fact that these final stages are going to see the nightmarish perfection of the technological system. Its hold over our lives is going to be complete. We will be locked into a dystopian horror that our greatest writers could scarcely imagine.

But not for long.

Meanwhile, what can we do? If you understand The Problem clearly enough, the response to it is obvious. What happens when you clearly see, for the first time perhaps, a bad habit that you were not aware you had; that you don’t pay attention, perhaps, when someone is speaking to you? Do you need a *solution* to this problem? Do you need to be *told* what to do? Or is it obvious?

Well, we are not paying attention. If we were, we would live differently. We would liberate ourselves, as best we can and, in so doing, we would feel good. It feels good to have a noble purpose and to work towards it, even if you never objectively succeed. It feels good to strive to overcome your machine-made fears and desires, even if you are never completely free. It feels good to be independent, even if you must compromise somewhere along the way.

This doesn’t mean you must immediately give up using all industrial technology. That is also impossible — as the fact I have written this on a laptop demonstrates — as well as absurdly simplistic. The technological system has, as we have seen, distorted our relationship with each other, it has taken the simple tools from our hands and made us forget how to use them, it has placed us under the thumb of technocrats, professionals, teachers, doctors and various ‘security’ forces, it has corroded our intelligence, drained us of energy, sickened us, confused us; it has even deprived us of our language, inserting itself between our understanding of our lives and the means by which we once creatively expressed that understanding. Freedom from the machine world isn’t just a question of turning off the laptop and throwing away the smartphone. It’s not enough to fight the machine on one front, the most obvious, the most direct — although that too, obviously — but, as it has insinuated itself in every aspect of our lives, even our thoughts and feelings, so *every* aspect of our lives is an arena of engagement, a nemesis to overcome, a prison to escape from — and the prison is *you*.

I don’t mean to suggest that self-overcoming and personal revolution are the only way out of the technological system — obviously not. That would amount to chronic self-absorption. Even the revolutionary acts we are called upon to make in the world, once we are determined to free ourselves of its hold over lives, are not enough (I am referring to our battles in the workplace, in the neighbourhood and with the various institutions we must deal with). Something much more thorough is required to bring the system down.

Here we must recognise something else that is not always obvious about the technological problem, aside from its breadth and depth; something that must also be considered if we are to confront the machine-world intelligently, and that is the fact that it cannot be reformed. *Ever*. Just as every major development in the system

immediately generated concomitant developments everywhere else, which seamlessly integrated themselves with each other, so the autonomous nature and almost inconceivable power of the system — not to mention the sludgelike passivity and learned helplessness of the domesticated mass — remains *completely* untouched by piecemeal adjustments, which almost instantly hit institutional limits by virtue of the fact that everything else in the system is threatened by them.

We've looked at one very intimate example of this in the life of poor Tom, who is unable to deal with any of his problems because they are all rooted in the same sterile soil. Just consider, by way of just another, less personal, example, what it would mean to *meaningfully* reform schooling, so that children could learn their culture in the manner they have learnt it for hundreds of thousands of years, by *directly* participating in it. In order for this to work everything would have to change — all of society would have to become educational; it would have to become a place that children can learn from, rather than a place they can do nothing but passively observe. And when I say 'educational' I mean meaningfully educational; allowing children to discover who they are, rather than forcing them to do what the system requires. What's more, all the system-made distractions and addictions which would instantly absorb the attention of children allowed to live freely would have to be removed from their lives. All of this would mean the total disintegration of every aspect of the system.

Similar considerations prevent us from ever taking *any* of our technologies a step back. Consider what it would mean to return to horse-drawn carriages, or to coal-burning heating systems, or to paper or tape-based information and filing systems. Again *everything* would have to change. Only *forward* makes sense to the technological system, only *more*, only *bigger*. *Less*, *backwards* and *smaller* are as inconceivable to machines — and to mechanised minds — as qualitatively *different* or *better*. So it *must* go forward, and those who dream of a future utopia *must* assume that it will be, with various permacultural frills and eco-harmonious designs, *more* developed.

All of this applies to meaningfully addressing — as in *actually* solving — any one of the following problems; nuclear weapons, the emptying of the oceans and the erosion of top-soil, overpopulation, genetic engineering, the proliferation of microplastics and other pollutants, widespread madness (addiction, anxiety, depression, etc.), the death of culture, the death of gender, generalised incompetence, outrageous inequality, corruption, the iniquitous exploitation of the poor or any of the other problems I've mentioned so far. Even if any one of these things could be effectively dealt with within, say, a hundred years — which is very unlikely — dealing with any one of them throws the whole system into disarray, which is why defenders of the system simply will not allow *any* aspect of the system to meaningfully change — even if it could — which is why, further, as any reader with the slightest intellectual honesty will recognise, there has been no real progress dealing with any of the serious problems humanity faces. *None*.

You can *believe* that a few new laws will fix things, or that a new green technology will be invented which will magically clear everything up, or that a successful anti-

lockdown movement will liberate us, or that the ‘right leadership’ will rescue us all, but only by not paying attention to how tightly integrated the system is, how widespread the wasteland world actually is, or how profoundly invasive it is, the result of a process which, as mentioned above, has taken *thousands* of years to reach its current global form. Such development cannot be turned around in a few years or even decades. If genuine reform *were* possible it would take centuries to change society from within, *far* longer than we have before nature and human nature are obliterated.

The best that can be (vainly) hoped for is that one group of technocrats are replaced by another, trendier group. Such a hope is rarely articulated by radical (leftist, socialist, Marxist or nominally ‘anarchist’) authors, they are rarely aware of it, but this is the *inevitable* outcome of reforming society without meaningfully addressing the technological system. You can have the landscape scattered with permacultural cloud farms and propertyless vegan love-ins, but if no meaningful movement has been made towards addressing the global machine upon which society is built, a powerful technocratic, bureaucratic class of intellectuals will *have* to exist to maintain it. This class will then *be* what powerful professionals always are — bland, bodiless brains on legs — and *do* what powerful professionals always do — dominate society in the name of caring for it.

This is why the perennial objection to these kind of critiques — that ‘technology is neutral’, that it ‘depends how it is used’ — is so short-sighted. Technophiles assume that the internet is the same kind of thing as a stone axe, when vastly complex machines are not just different in degree but completely different in kind to simple tools. It may be the case that a nuclear weapon is ‘neutral’ in the already absurdly limited sense that it can be exploded or not, but, like all the high-tech devices we now rely on, they are part of a system which *demand*s a certain kind of society; namely, the one we have, in which education, politics, law, transport and health are, and can only be, *technical concerns*.

What’s more, *who* is to decide how all this technology is used? It’s ridiculous enough to make the claim that we have ‘a choice’ about how we can use bucket-wheel excavators, it’s even more stupid to assert that the technological system which demands the use of such machines is ‘neutral’, but even given these fantastic assumptions, there is nothing in the training of scientists and engineers to enable them to decide how hyper-complex machines can be used, nor can there be; as not only can morality never be found in technical (‘scientific’) education, but is a threat which is and must be eradicated *by* that education. So what if technology is ‘neutral’ when those with power over it are *guaranteed* never to be able to use it wisely?

It is striking, discussing these matters, how similar counter-arguments are to those of religious adherents, for indeed we are talking about a religion. It has its high priests and fanatics, and it has its casual believers and lapsed lay folk, but regardless of how conscious individuals are of their technophilia, all are enfolded into the system which produces it. We live to the rhythm of the machine, we encase ourself in its shields, we filter our senses through it and, if we own or manage it, we gain our livelihood from it.

We are *already* cyborgs, our intelligence is *already* artificial, our reality *already* virtual. This is why although a typical modern may never have uttered a word in its defence, he will react to the idea that we are imprisoned by the technological system, that it is unreformable, that it is not ‘neutral’, that it has its own priorities, that it runs the world and that it ruins man and woman, in exactly the same way as all believers react to the reality of the illusion they live by; with silence, ridicule, sophistry, fear and violence.

A version of this essay appears in *Ad Radicem*, a collection of radical reflections on the system and the self, which includes ‘Spectacle and Simulation’ an enquiry into the technological system’s colonisation of consciousness and ‘The Postmodern Nightmare’, a new critique of the ‘borderless’ philosophy of the system.

Further Reading

- *The Technological Society* (and *The Technological System*) Jacques Ellul
- *Energy and Equity* Ivan Illich
- *Technics and Civilisation* Lewis Mumford
- *Small is Beautiful* E.F. Schumacher
- *Technological Slavery* Theodore ('Ted') Kaczynski
- *Twilight of the Machines* John Zerzan
- *The Book of Chuang Tzu* (trans. Merton)
- *The Metaphysics of Technology* David Skrbina
- *Lady Chatterley's Lover* D.H. Lawrence

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Darren Allen
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29 December, 2021

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