The Unabomber Was Only Half Right

A Review of Kevin Kelly's What Technology Wants

David Banks

February 23, 2012

Usually, I would not bother reviewing a book that has been out for over a year, but Kevin Kelly's *What Technology Wants* complicates this blog's ongoing discussion of public intellectuals and the translation of social theory into popular press books. Kelly claims to have read "every book on the philosophy and theory of technology." If we are to take him at his word, and if we assume his own conclusions are based on (or are at the very least- informed by) that reading, we should seriously consider the overall quality of the corpus of Science and Technology Studies (STS) and related fields. As social scientists we must ask ourselves: If Kelly's work can legitimately connect itself to the likes of Nye, Winner, and Ellul, and still produce a politically and morally ambivalent conclusion, are we failing to provide theoretical tools that lead to a better world?

A little less than a year ago, Evgeny Morozov reviewed *What Technology Wants.* His conclusion –expressed in his typical wry style- cuts to the heart of the matter:

> Kelly is not the first technology guru to make a living by selling advice to corporations. But it is hard to imagine the previous generation of serious thinkers about technology—the likes of Jacques Ellul and Lewis Mumford and John Dewey—moonlighting as corporate advisers to Danone and Halliburton. In contrast, most of today's technology gurus-from Kevin Kelly to Clay Shirky to Douglas Rushkoff—take special pride in publicizing how deeply embedded they are in the very industry that they are supposed to scrutinize. Perhaps this is what technology wants.

Kelly's thesis is not too far off from the work of Mumford or Ellul. Whereas Ellul might say *technique* has always been a force in human history but has only recently overcome countervailing institutions; and Mumford would agree that the industrial revolution needed *both* steam power *and* the socioeconomic desire for factory efficiency; Kelly contends that the *technium* is a natural force that springs from our collective imagination and goes to work assembling itself and acting as a counter-balance to natural entropy. Natural forces want chaos; the technium wants to bring order and complexity to systems. In other words, technology wants nothing more than to add choice, complexity, and diversity to the universe. This cosmic force, according to Kelly, provides a net benefit to society and must be left alone in order to flourish.

I will admit loudly and declaratively, that this book does more to popularize critical thinking on technology than a dozen careers in STS. That being said, I completely disagree with Kelly's conclusions. This book, as Morozov notes, sits (unapologetically and rather comfortably) next to orthodox industry talk about ever-increasing prosperity delivered by scientific innovation. Kelly makes dozens of strong declarations that could only come from a white man that can mitigate the risks of modern society. "When it comes to risk aversion," Kelly asserts, "we are not rational." He uses this line of reasoning to promote a *laissez faire* attitude toward precautionary regulations of new or existing technologies. Demanding nothing less than irrefutable proof of danger

would have kept lead paint and asbestos on the market. It also assumes equal access to environmental monitoring and product safety. Poor communities rarely have control over (or are even aware of) the environmental dangers that threaten their homes. This lack of scientific, measurable proof is a function of values and morals- things that Kelly refuses to factor into his work because, for him, global *average* progress is the only kind of progress that matters.

Strangely enough, the essays of Charles Dickens become relevant here. Dickens was a staunch critic of, what was then, the new field of statistics. For Dickens, the invention of the "average man" was a powerful silencing force for politicians and greedy businessmen. They need only point to the increasing wage/health/happiness of the "average person" to justify their actions. Talk of averages prevented conversations about the poorest in a society. Kelly does the same thing when dismissing the darker sides of the "technium":

> He [Wendell Berry] gets stuck on the cold, hard, yucky, stuff, such as steam engines, chemicals, and hardware, which may be the mere juvenile state of more mature things. Viewed from a wider perspective, where steam engines are merely a tiny part of the whole, convivial forms of technology really do allow us to be better.

Who is the "we" that is living better? The chinese sweatshop workers who build iPads are more likely to deal with the "yucky stuff" than the Palo Alto knowledge worker. Kelly challenges the claims made by the Amish about living totally off the grid (they purchase and rely upon goods that are manufactured using tools they outlaw in their own communities) but does not offer the same critical thought to American capitalism. We need authoritarian regimes to produce the artifacts that embody the glorious technium.

For Kelly, "moral progress, is ultimately a human invention. It is a useful product of our wills and minds, and thus it is a technology." Human betterment is "propelled by technology" so any effort to slow down technological progress is an effort to slow down social betterment. This is a common analytical error that is not unique to Kelly. Most popular press books, through one way or another, conclude that technological progress is equivalent to; evidence of; or a prerequisite for social change. Winner has challenged these sorts of claims throughout his work, but it is ignored by Kelly.

If Kelly believes that the technium is the cosmic propeller of human advancement, then I am not entirely surprised that he would devote an entire chapter to Ted Kacynski's manifesto. As a member of the society that was once suspected of housing the Unabomber [PDF] I cannot fault Kelly for this bit of stagecraft. The manifesto is sensational, very controversial, and –as an entire room of Ph.Ds concluded [pay wall]- not totally wrong. But Kacynski's work would have never passed the editorial board of ST&HV and his abstract would not have been admitted to 4S. Kelly's book and Kacynski's writings both benefit from extreme abstraction and macro perspectives that erase the kinds of important distinctions that make for good theory and critique. Both

Kelly and Kacynski do a poor job of operationalizing the relationship of nature and technology. For Kacynski, technology is a distinct, identifiable and alien entity that invades the natural order. For Kelly, technology emerges out of human activity and picks up where biology left off- diversifying and adding complexity to the universe. These sweeping explanations ignore the social realities of knowledge production and the embedded politics of technological artifacts.

Kelly gives the average reader a powerful shove into the world of science and technology studies. He urges us to earnestly consider the deeper meaning and underlying motivations of our creations. But his conclusions are, by design, morally ambiguous and dangerously ambivalent to the real-world plight of most humans.Anyone with a degree in Science and Technology Studies should read Kelly's book. Not because he has a new set of ideas that you should incorporate into your work, or because he he does a good job of bringing the theories of Winner, Nye and Ellul to a popular audience. He does neither of these things. Instead, Kelly has taken advantage of the social problems approach that is so popular within STS, and has provided a solution- a practice that is not very popular in STS. My bookshelf is full of very well-articulated problems, but very few solutions. Kelly's book has one very clear suggestion- leave technology alone so that it may reach its inevitable conclusion. I am not sure if this means STS writers need to offer more prescriptive conclusions, or we must do a better job of correcting the record when our work is used to further the goals of industry. Either way, Kelly has taught us all a valuable lesson that we cannot afford to ignore.

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