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THEORIZING TECHNOLOGY IN THE "POST-ESSENTIALIST" ERA

Abstract: The end of the last century and the beginning of the new millennium, are witnessing an increasing penetration of science and technology in individual as well as social life. Unquestionable positive development of the scientific evolution and technological advancement, which enabled transcendence of the natural limitations and made our life increasingly easier, are associated with such side effects that are producing new challenges, problems and difficulties for humankind.

We are, as Neil Postman used to say, developing a new religion: the faith in technology. Believing in Enlightenment grand narrative of Progress, we are inclined to think that human progress and technological innovations are the same thing and that the paradise can be achieved through greater commitment to technology. Although the relationship between science and technology is dialectically conditioned, we wouldn't have this technological development if there were not scientific discoveries. But the paradox is that science has become a servant of technology, because technology it seems that has betrayed the original telos of science, which was Knowing, or discovering the truth of existence through progressive unfolding of the nature's secrets. This betrayal has produced an epoch of epistemological discourage, ontological forgetfulness, moral nihilism, political deligitimation and cultural alienation. We have break up with all the traditional narratives, including the metaphysical as well as religious one, which provided the human being with a sense of meaning and spirituality.

This vacuum has been gradually fulfilled by new truths. In this context, what technology has done so far was replacing some traditional "objective" truths transmitted through religion, myth, legends etc. by other technological functional truths engineered by science. The difference is that technological truths are more functional that those religiously related. Sometimes even God doesn't respond, but if you are capable of using technology correctly the results are beyond questions. As Jacques Ellul, one of the eminent critic of technology, used to say: "everything can be contested, even God, but not technological progress". Having abandoned any telos in nature or in human life, breaking up with all traditional narratives that have provided pre-established meaning of life and giving up from the philosophical attempts to envision an essence of human in relation to nature, make us to believe that we

live in a "post-essentialist" era, or as Fukuyama used to argue, "post-human future". Therefore, we are now opened to all the technological possibilities. But lacking any pre-established and philosophically legitimized natural essence of human as well as legitimized ethical narrative that could direct the technological innovations, technology can very easily follow a blind course of development. The challenges that a "blind" technological development imposes today are mostly related to social adaptation to the new technologically engineered social and natural environment; social isolation of an individual; physical passivity; meaning of freedom; moral implications; redefinition of religion and spirituality; biotechnology and genetic engineering, etc.

Since we do not have any essentialist legitimized vision of human nature because we live in a "post-essentialist" era we ought to be very carefully and very serious in addressing all these challenges imposed by technological development. As we have mentioned earlier, the positive results of technological development are beyond question; they have improved the human condition and increased the social welfare. But these issues are not part of this paper. This paper will concentrate mostly on bad sides of the technological development aiming at showing the risks that we are exposed to. In doing so we will be referring to most recognized critics of technology, such as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Ellul, Herbert Marcuse, Neil Postman, Francis Fukuyama etc.

THEORIZING TECHNOLOGY

Two Approaches:

1. How we use it or how are we being use by it?
   redefinition of traditional concepts and social practices
2. How technology is challenging our common sense about human nature through its genetic modification?
   denatyralization and desacralisation of human nature

Technology can be theorized into two different ways when it comes to its relation to humankind: firstly, what is the impact the technological innovation is having on our mental structures and social relation, i.e. psychic and social effect? Ex. Redefinition of community! Physical social community means negotiating our differences, meanwhile social virtual community obliterate our differences. Virtual community has changed the meaning of the concept "community": in the traditional sense, the community is the result of negotiation the differences, while on the Internet the word community takes a different meaning, i.e. a group of people with similar interests.

Secondly, what is the impact the technology, while intervening in our very genetic structure through scientific studies, is having on our ontological structure as a human being? The second question I am referring here to the Neopharmacology, Nanotechnology, Genetic Engineering (approached by somatic gene therapy and germ-line engineering), Human Genome Project, Biotechnology, Bioinformatics, Molecular Biology, Stem Cell sciences etc. These technological advancement and scientific innovations have made possible appearing the new cuasy-scientifically based intelectuall as well as cultural movement, so called: post-humanism especially trans-humanism.

> The common question: what technology **CAN DO**
> The wise question: what technology **WILL UNDO**

Nothing comes free!

> Technology and science as a new faith / religion!
>
> Any difference?
>
> "everything can be contested, even God, but not the technological progress"
>
> *Jacques Ellul*
>
> "the scientistic belief in a science […] is not science, but bad philosophy"
>
> *Jürgen Habermas*
>
> "the blind development of technology strengthens social oppression and exploitation threatens at every stage to transform progress into its opposite, complete barbarism"
>
> *Max Horkheimer*

In *One-Dimensional Man*, the left neo-Marxist critic Herbert Marcuse used to argue the triumph of the positive thinking over the negative thinking, i.e. positivism against transcendental as well as metaphysical thought. Scientific positivism has rendered irrelevant and meaningless all other non-scientific approaches toward human as well as society. Consequently these developments produced the contemporary scientific reductionism. Speculative and abstract reflections, including the metaphysical thought since the Antic Greece onward and philosophical anthropology as well as all religious visions about the human nature it seems that are irreversibly challenged by positivistic sciences. This scientistic attitude which relies on hope that the only instrument through which reality can be conceptually reconstructed and encompassed is a kind of philosophy after all. But, as Habermas used to argue, "the scientistic belief in a science […] is not science, but bad philosophy."

WISDOM AND QUESTIONS

No questions please! We are post-humans!

I composed this sentence as a rhetorical one, recalling the Zizek's sentence "No sex please, we are posthuman". In one of his very rare filmed recordings called "The Betrayal of Technology" (which you can find it for yourself at You Tube), the well-known author of the famous book *Technological Society*, Jacques Ellul, used to argue that technology obliges us to live more and more quickly. Inner reflection is replaced by reflex. According to Ellul, reflection means that, after we have undergone an experience we think about that experience. In the case of reflex we know immediately what you must do in a certain situation, i.e. without thinking. Therefore, technology requires us no longer to think about things. The only thing technology requires of us is: don't think about it, use your reflexes!

Wisdom does not come from intellectual reflections. It is achieved in a long process of transfer from generation to generation. It is an accumulation of experiences in direct relationship with the natural social climate. Nature served as an example for us. We must divest ourselves of all that. For in technological society traditional human wisdom is not taken seriously.

I try to push Ellul's insight further by arguing that technology does not require us to think any more, but just to act almost entirely instinctively. In changing – indeed intensifying the social rhythm, technology is keeping us away from the innate questions that every human being would consider them legitimate: what's the purpose of my life? We don't have time to reflect about our own history; we are constantly avoiding the old metaphysical questions regarding the meaning of life. Not just we don't have time, but unconsciously we avoid asking those questions because we can experience an anxiety as a result of facing the resulted emptiness of scientist narrative. In this regard, SYSTEMICALLY speaking, technology has kept us blocked within its complex and very dynamic mixture meanwhile AXIOLOGICALY speaking, is distracting us by need and possibility for fulfilling that need for immediate gratifying of our needs.

TECHNOLOGY AS WILL TO POWER

We live in a world where the dominant discourse promoted by social science is that of relativism – indeed extreme moral relativism or, how postmodernists put it, "radical historicism". This means, as Postman used to simplify, "there are no ultimate truths, especially moral truths; that there is no transcendent authority to which we may appeal for a final answer to the question, Is this a right or wrong thing to do"? The vision of the world advocated implicitly by this discourse is a world without a vision. We are left to the will of the technology to lead us wherever it "wants" us to lead. The nietzshcean will to power find its own final accomplishment. Or, technology is, as Heidegger used to interpret Nietzsche, "exercising power for its own sake". No one exercises the power, but the power is exercised upon all of us. As Postman puts it, "we became tools of our tools".

So that's why we need to consider the following challenges and wise questions. In principle, human beings are adaptable beings; but technology as never before is challenging our capabilities for adaptation to the new ever increasingly sophisticated and complex technological environment; it creases or reduces the time that society needs to adapt itself to a new emerging and ever increasing technology; because collective adaptation is slower than the individual, the dynamic of technological innovation is intensified increasingly by challenging and deeply affecting the natural processes of social development as used to be in the previous social systems where the technology was pretty much stable; example: imagine someone in a running machine doing exercise to improve his health condition, body frames, enhance physical strength etc. and all of the sudden machine goes out of control, i.e. the ribbon runs faster than the man can run; the fall is unavoidable). Therefore, when analyzing the possibilities of technological innovation in relation to human adaptive capacity one has to think above all that of humanity, or society. Adaptation as a social whole is different from the individual adaptation.

THE FINAL RESULT

Well… theoretically this is one of the possible future of this course of technological development, at least we can speculate based on unintended consequences

CHALLENGES THAT NEED TO BE CONSIDERED

Social isolation and …

Social isolation of the individual (voting, shopping, etc.. Be made online) precludes the physical coo presence. This reduces social responsibility. Because coo presence is somewhat intrusive, built in, social responsibility.

Modern science fiction usually portrays the future world as a shiny utopia of science and advanced learning. Either that, or it's a post-apocalyptic wasteland ravaged by science gone amok or man's own arrogance. Idiocracy takes a look at where the world's headed right now and says forget it. None of that's going to happen, we're just going to get really stupid. The film's all-out, hilarious assault on the future's culture is also a biting criticism of our own. As the world's people have gotten dumber so have its businesses. The future is full of idiots who've thrown everything they have into buying Big-Gulps and watching porn. The most popular television show is called "Ow, My Balls" and features exactly what you'd expect. The highest grossing movie of all time is called Ass, and consists of 90 minutes of the same naked, hairy butt on screen farting itself silly. America has gone to hell in a hand basket. Garbage avalanches are common, crops have failed, and people are starving, all because there's no one left who's smart enough to know how to fix any of it.

In order to relieve himself, man uses technology for everything. The consequence is laziness. He is heading towards a total passivization of his being. Once upon a time, the technology, through mechanization and automation offered, had the function of reducing physical torture in the production process. It gradually comes into our lives to save us even from those hardships which are completely natural to man, such as food preparation and serving. For these kinds of services, are designed family robots that will save the family members from the most natural tasks. So, easiness has become an end to itself. Aiming to broaden the scope of our freedom through automatization and mechanization of the production process, we have reduced it with automatization and mechanization of our social life. In this way we are also risking the natural tissue of social life, made up of freedom, responsibility and spontaneity. Prototype of such a mechanism would be the hollywood designed future illustrated in the movie "Idiocracy".

Mania in making easy everything, respectively transcending our natural immediacy that keeps us limited by physical limitation, risks total pasivizim. This film illustrates the extreme case of the technological facilitation of our individual and social life.

CHALLENGES THAT NEED TO BE CONSIDERED

... individual passivization
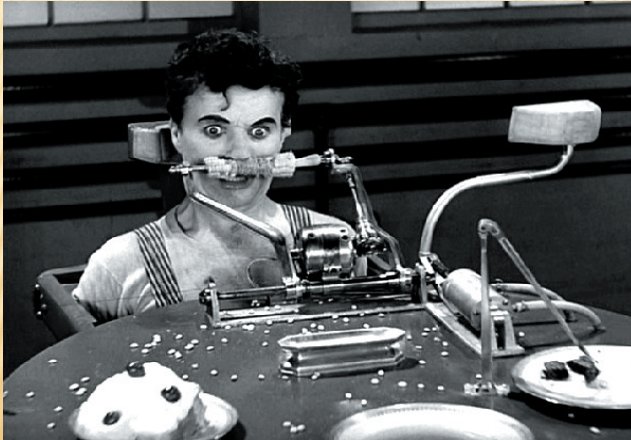
CHALLENGES THAT NEED TO BE CONSIDERED

Freedom vs Security

technological control has become a source of heteronymous morality.

Exchange the freedom for safety security. Technologically adapted environments demonstrate the way how the Hobbesian idea of exchanging the freedom for security has become reality. Technological penetration has desacralized intimate privacy. Potentially can be known everything... no secrets! In this sense, technological control has become a source of heteronymous morality.

Deprivation of "enjoyment" the sin. God's metaphysical omnipresence has been replaced by technological human omnipresence. Believer knows that God is watching but His physical lack somehow gives the believer a commodity to make sin. But, now all around us are cameras. In contrast to religious heteronymous morality, the morality that comes from technological controll produces *paranoia or impudence*. Last year in October, have been published (one thousand eight hundred and ninty 1890 profile users of child pornography sites ... daily time, dt. 10/25/2011). The loneliness is not a guarantee for covering our sins... at best this is just nostalgia for our past. Stars in the sky that accompanied us in our loneliness have been replaced by technological satellites that spy our loneliness.

MODERN TIMES 2

Modern Times, 1936   Contemporary times, 2012

Chaplins last 'silent' film, filled with sound effects, was made when everyone else was making talkies. The idea of the film was apparently given to Chaplin by a young reporter, who told him about the production line system in Detroit, which was turning its workers into nervous wrecks. Charlie turns against modern society, the machine age, (The use of sound in films ?) and progress. Firstly we see Charlie frantically trying to keep up with a production line, tightening bolts. So he is literally trapped in the machine. And then is selected for an experiment with an automatic feeding machine. This is one of his finest patches of comic invention, where he is battered and buffeted by an automatic feeding machine introduced by his bosses to save time and money. But various mishaps leads his boss to believe he has gone mad, and Charlie is sent to a mental hospital...

QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE ASKED

Wisdom does not imply having the right answers.
It implies only asking the right questions

Neil Postman

1. What is the problem to which a particular technology is a solution
2. Whose problem is it?
3. Which people and institutions might be most seriously harmed by a technological solution
4. What problems might be created?
5. What sort of people and institutions might acquire special economic and political power because of technological change?
6. What changes in language are being forced be new technologies, and what is being gained and lost by such changes?

"All our inventions are but improved means to an unimproved end"

Henry David Thoreau

[Huxley] was trying to tell us that what afflicted the people in *Brave New World* was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking.

Neil Postman