

Technology

By John Zerzan

Tech-nol-o-gy n. According to Webster's: industrial or applied science. In reality: the ensemble of division of labor/production/industrialism and its impact on us and on nature. Technology is the sum of mediations between us and the natural world and the sum of those separations mediating us from each other. it is all the drudgery and toxicity required to produce and reproduce the stage of hyper-alienation we live in. It is the texture and the form of domination at any given stage of hierarchy and commodification.

Those who still say that technology is "neutral," "merely a tool," have not yet begun to consider what is involved. Junger, Adorno and Horkheimer, Ellul and a few others over the past decades - not to mention the crushing, all but unavoidable truth of technology in its global and personal toll - have led to a deeper approach to the topic. Thirty-five years ago the esteemed philosopher Jaspers wrote that "Technology is only a means, in itself neither good nor evil. Everything depends upon what man makes of it, for what purpose it serves him, under what conditions he places it." The archaic sexism aside, such superficial faith in specialization and technical progress is increasingly seen as ludicrous. Infinitely more on target was Marcuse when he suggested in 1964 that "the very concept of technical reason is perhaps ideological. Not only the application of technology, but technology itself is domination... methodical, ascientific, calculated, calculating control." Today we experience that control as a steady reduction of our contact with the living world, a speeded-up Information Age emptiness drained by computerization and poisoned by the dead, domesticating imperialism of high-tech method. Never before have people been so infantilized, made so dependant on the machine for everything; as the earth rapidly approaches its extinction due to technology, our souls are shrunk and flattened by its pervasive rule. Any sense of wholeness and freedom can only return by the undoing of the massive division of labour at the heart of technological progress. This is the liberatory project in all its depth.

Of course, the popular literature does not yet reflect a critical awareness of what

technology is. Some works completely embrace the direction we are being taken, such as McCorduck's 'Machines Who Think' and Simons' 'Are Computers Alive?', to mention a couple of the more horrendous. Other, even more recent books seem to offer a judgement that finally flies in the face of mass pro-tech propaganda, but fail dismally as they reach their conclusions. Murphy, Mickunas and Pilotta edited 'The Underside of High-Tech: Technology and the Deformation of Human Sensibilities', whose ferocious title is completely undercut by an ending that technology will become human as soon as we change our assumptions about it! Very similar is Siegel and Markoff's 'The High Cost of High Tech'; after chapters detailing the various levels of technological debilitation, we once again learn that it's all just a question of attitude: "We must, as a society, understand the full impact of high technology if we are to shape it into a tool for enhancing human comfort, freedom and peace." This kind of cowardice and/or dishonesty owes only in part to the fact that major publishing corporations do not wish to publicize fundamentally radical ideas.

The above-remarked flight into idealism is not a new tactic of avoidance. Martin Heidegger, considered by some the most original and deep thinker of this century, saw the individual becoming only so much raw material for the limitless expansion of industrial technology. Incredibly, his solution was to find in the Nazi movement the essential "encounter between global technology and modern man." Behind the rhetoric of National Socialism, unfortunately, was only an acceleration of technique, even into the sphere of genocide as a problem of industrial production. For the Nazis and the gullible, it was, again a question of how technology is understood ideally, not as it really is. In 1940, the General Inspector for the German Road System put it this way: "Concrete and stone are material things. Man gives them form and spirit. National Socialist technology possesses in all material achievement ideal content."

The bizarre case of Heidegger should be a reminder to all that good intentions can go wildly astray without a willingness to face technology and its systematic nature as part of practical social reality. Heidegger feared the political consequences of really looking at technology critically; his apolitical theorizing thus constituted a part of the most monstrous development of modernity, despite his intention.

EarthFirst! claims to put nature first, to be above all petty "politics." But it could well be that behind the macho swagger of a Dave Foreman (and the "deep ecology" theorists who also warn against radicals) is a failure of nerve like Heidegger's, and the consequence, conceivably could be similar.