In the Absence of the Sacred

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Originally I planned to write two books. The first was to be a critique of technological society as we know it in the United States, a kind of sequel to *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. Instead of concentrating on TV, though, it would have focused on the new technological axe: “the information society,” computerization, robotization, space travel, artificial intelligence, genetics, satellite communications. This seemed timely, since these technologies are changing our world at an astoundingly accelerating rate. Thus far, most people view these changes as good. But are they?

That our society would tend to view new technologies favorably is understandable. The first waves of news concerning any technical innovation are invariably positive and optimistic. That’s because, in our society, the information is purveyed by those who stand to gain from our acceptance of it: corporations and their retainers in the government and scientific communities. None is motivated to report the negative sides of new technologies, so the public gets its first insights and expectations from sources that are clearly biased.

Over time, as successive generations of idealized technical innovations are introduced and presented at World’s Fairs, in futurists’ visions, and in hundreds of billions of dollars’ worth of advertising, we develop expectations of a technological utopia here on Earth and in great domed cities in space. We begin to equate technological evolution with evolution itself, as though the two were equally inevitable, and virtually identical. The operating homilies become “Progress is good,” “There’s no turning back,” and “Technology will free humans from disease, strife, and unremitting toil.”

Debate on these subjects is inhibited by the fact that views of technology in our society are nearly identical across the political and social spectrum. The Left takes the same view of technology as do corporations, futurists, and the Right. Technology, they all say, is neutral. It has no inherent politics, no inevitable social or environmental consequences. What matters, according to this view, is who controls technology.

I have attended dozens of conferences in the last ten years on the future of technology. At every one, whether sponsored by government, industry, or environmentalists or other activists, someone will address the assembly with something like this: "There are many problems with technology and we need to acknowledge them, but the problems are not rooted to the technologics themselves. They are caused by the way we have chosen to use them. We can do better. We must do better. Machines don’t cause problems, people do." This is always said as if it were an original and profound idea, when actually everyone else is saying exactly the same thing.

As we will see, the idea that technology is neutral is itself not neutral - it directly serves the interests of the people who benefit from our inability to see where the juggernaut is headed.

I only began to glimpse the problem during the 1960s when I saw how excited our society became about the presumed potentials of television. Activists, like everyone else, saw the technology opportunistically, and began to vie with other segments of society for their twenty seconds on the network news. A kind of war developed for access to this powerful new instrument that spoke pictures into the brains of the whole population, but the outcome was predetermined. We should have realized it was a foregone conclusion that TV technology would inevitably be controlled by corporations, the government, and the military. Because of the technology’s geographic scale, its cost, the astounding power of its imagery, and its ability to homogenize thought, behavior, and culture, large corporations found television uniquely efficient for ingraining a way of life that served (and still serves) their interests. And in times of national crisis, the government and military find TV a perfect instrument for the centralized control of
Now we have the frenzy over computers, which, in theory, can empower individuals and small groups and produce a new information democracy. In fact, the issue of who benefits most from computers was already settled when they were invented. Computers, like television, are far more valuable and helpful to the military, to multinational corporations, to international banking, to governments, and to institutions of surveillance and control - all of whom use this technology on a scale and with a speed that are beyond our imaginings - than they ever will be to you and me.

Computers have made it possible to instantaneously move staggering amounts of capital, information, and equipment throughout the world, giving unprecedented power to the largest institutions on the earth. In fact, computers make these institutions possible. Meanwhile, we use our personal computers to edit our copy and hook into our information networks - and believe that makes us more powerful.

Even environmentalists have contributed to the problem by failing to effectively criticize technical evolution despite its obvious, growing, and inherent bias against nature. I fear that the ultimate direction of technology will become vividly clear to us only after we have popped out of the "information age" - which does have a kind of benevolent ring - and realize what is at stake in the last two big "wilderness intervention" battlegrounds: space and the genetic structures of living creatures. From there, it's on to the "postbiological age" of nanotechnology and robotics, whose advocates don't even pretend to care about the natural world. They think it's silly and out of date.

This first book was intended to raise questions about whether technological society has lived up to its advertising, and also to address some grave concerns about its future direction. Until now we have been impotent in the face of the juggernaut, partly because we are so unpracticed in technological criticism. We don't really know how to assess new or existing technologies. It is apparent that we need a new, more holistic language for examining technology, one that would ignore the advertised claims, best-case visions, and glamorous imagery that induct us and systematically judge technology from alternative perspectives: social, political, economic, spiritual, ecological, biological, military. Who gains? Who loses? Do the new technologies serve planetary destruction or stability? What are their health effects? Psychological effects? How do they affect our interaction with and appreciation of nature? How do they interlock with existing technologies? What do they make possible that could not exist before? What is being lost? Where is it all going? Do we want that? In the end, we can see that technological evolution is leading to something new: a worldwide, interlocked, monolithic, technical-political web of unprecedented negative implications.

The second book was to be a kind of continuation and update of Dee Brown's Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee. That book impressed me tremendously when I read it thirty years ago. In one sense it was a masterful work, detailing in excruciating fashion U.S. double-dealing and brutality against the Indians. But in another sense Brown did the Indian cause a disservice by seeming to suggest that they were all wiped out, and that now there is nothing to be done. The book put the reader through a catharsis; having read it, it was as if one had already paid one's dues. Combined with the popular imagery from television and films, the book helped remand Indian issues to the past.

Even liberal-minded people, concerned about issues of justice, who ac-knowledge the atrocities committed on this land, tend to speak of Indian issues as tragedies of the distant past. So ingrained is this position that when, occasionally, non-Indians do come forward on behalf of present day Indian causes - Marlon Brando, William Kunstler, Robert Redford, Kevin Costner, Jane Fonda - they are all put into that "romantic" category. People are a bit embarrassed for them, as if they'd stepped over some boundary of propriety. When environmentalists such as David Brower occasionally speak publicly about how we should heed the philosophies of the Inuit (Eskimos), they are thought impractical, uncool, not politic, not team players. (And when a specific issue pits native traditions against some current environmental concern, such as fur trapping, or subsistence sealing, or whaling, the native viewpoint is not given a fair hearing.) Literary luminaries like Peter Matthiessen have also been chastised for hooks on contemporary Indian issues (In the Spirit of Crazy Horse and Indian Country, with the implication that they should return to novels and Zen explorations.

I have had my own experiences with this. In Four Arguments I reported several encounters with Indians as a way of revealing bias in the media. I was surprised at the number of critics who cited those lines as foolish. Gene Youngblood, for example, a respected radical writer on media issues, said, "Mander is so naive.... My God, that old sixties chestnut, the Indians."

I thought that even Nelson Mandela got that treatment when he spoke about Indians at his Igno Oakland rally. The news reports seemed to suggest that he didn't quite understand "our Indians."

The Indian issue is not part of the distant past. Many of the worst anti-Indian campaigns were undertaken scarcely 80 to 100 years ago. Your great-grandparents were already alive at the time. The Model-T Ford was on the road.

More to the point is that the assaults continue today. While the Custer period of direct military action against Indians may be over in the United States, more subtle though equally devastating "legalistic" manipulations continue to separate Indians from their land and sovereignty, as can be seen from the horrible events in Alaska (described in Chapter 16 of his book. -Ed.).

There are still over one and a half million Indians in the United States today. Significant numbers of them continue to live in wilderness and desert regions and in the far north of Alaska, often
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paradise, or that the answer is something simpler?

Finally, which is the more “romantic” viewpoint: that technology will fix itself and lead us to

Revolution is about a century old, and we have had ample time to draw a few conclusions about

But the assertion that technological society is something higher than what came before, and that it

All things considered, it may be the central assumption of technological society that there is virtue

All of these acts were and are made possible by one fundamental rationalization: that our society

Save for such nascent movements as bioregionalism and Green politics, which have at least

All of these perspectives: Right, Left, Capitalist, and Marxist.

But the assertion that technological society is something higher than what came before, and that it

The next questions become: Can we expect the situation to improve or worsen in the future? And

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