Technocracy

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The Sibyl of Cumae, whose famous Sibylline Leaves perished in a fire in ancient Rome, was said to have gained her powers from Apollo. The sun-god offered to grant the Sibyl any boon if she would spend the night with him. She accepted his offer, asking him for as many years of life as grains of sand she could squeeze within her hand. Apollo granted this, and the Sibyl, overjoyed at realizing her wish, refused his advances. Thereupon her wish became a curse; an extended life, but not extended youth. Over many, many years, her aged form shriveled up so small that it could fit into a jar. Needing neither food nor drink, as she could neither die of hunger nor thirst, the jar was hung from a tree. Occasionally she would spout new oracles while children would watch her jar and tease, "Sibyl, Sibyl, what do you wish for?" In a faint whisper, she would reply, "I wish to die."

The story of the Sibyl of Cumae could well be a parable on modern medicine, with its respirators and life-support equipment. More broadly, it hints at the nature of technology itself, its reality vis-à-vis its promise. If we were to travel back in time a thousand years, and tell the first person we met of the marvels of our age — of cars and airplanes, of telephones and computers, of fruits in winter and ice in summer — our listener would doubtless imagine a world where magic reigned, a world where humans had become demigods.

Yet few of us who live in the present find our era magical, rather the opposite. Likewise, most of us don't find modern society to be particularly empowering or enriching so much as draining and devoid of enchantment.

The most affecting moment for me in cinema is the beginning of George Lucas's dystopic nightmare THX-1138. The film opens with scenes from the Buck Roger's series of the '30s, as a narrator excitedly intones, "Buck Rogers in the 25th century!" And then, the screen goes blank as the music changes, becoming bleak and ominous. The world of ray-guns and jet-packs is left behind and we, the viewers, know, without anything being shown us, the unreality of such innocent imaginings in the face of the horrors the future might hold.

The film itself is perhaps the finest vision of a technocracy yet produced. The specifics — society moved underground; robot cops and drone-like, human workers sustained by behavioral drugs; the complete erasure of the individual, with even names replaced by numbers; the total conquest of nature by an arid, lifeless landscape of the artificial — might vary from what we expect (in fact, almost certainly does vary from what our bleak future portends), but the concept of a society almost completely shaped by the demands of technology holds.

The concept of technocracy is ill-understood, even by many individuals who are knowledgeable in the societal effects of technology. Much of the literature on technology in relation to human freedom concerns itself with the powers of the state; whether technology has the power to emancipate the individual from governmental coercion; or conversely, whether technology augments state power. Salient examples can be elicited for either side; say, encryption software for the former, spy satellites for the latter. The topic is fascinating, but limited. Technology touches our lives in far more ways than can check or be checked by the state. It affects our work, our culture, our social relations, even our desires. Recognizing technology's breadth is a prerequisite to reaching any conclusions on its ultimate effects.

Technocracy is defined as "the management of society by technical experts" (Webster's 1971). More fundamentally, it is a society which makes sustaining and, to some extent, advancing a given level of technical achievement an issue of central importance. It should be noted that, within a century, it is quite likely that "technical experts" may mean artificial intelligence systems.

All civilizations have been, to some extent, technocracies. If our civilization surpasses all others in terms of technical proficiency, it still affords only the barest glimpse of what may lie ahead. Science-fiction author Vernor Vinge coined the term "singularity" to describe the future point at which technological development would accelerate so rapidly that nothing beyond that point could be reliably predicted. And the innovation which will give the primary impetus to a post-singularity future — nanotechnology — is only a few decades away from full development.

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