On Anarchism, Technology, and Transhumanism

reimagining

12/26/22

The more I wrestle with it, the more I become sympathetic to, if not a full-blown supporter of, anarchist-transhumanism. After much interrogation, the notion of technology as a neutral tool that can be leveraged to act as an oppressive method of control (to reduce agency and confine), an emancipatory tool (to resist domination, to expand agency and empower), or a complex overlapping web of both seems to generally ring true.

There has been a great deal of discussion regarding the Luddites on various social networking platforms, and how they fought against the socioeconomic context in which a specific new tech was being leveraged against them. They thought the most effective way to combat their imminent dispossession under the social relations the tech enabled was sabotage.

I would like to briefly connect this history to another example of a technology initially used as a tool of control: written language. Written language made its first appearance on the historical record some 5,500 years ago, distinctly as a technology of statecraft and domination. Now, as literacy has become more common, the writ-

ten word is often employed by the subaltern as a liberatory technology, a use antithetical to its origins.

Conceiving of and critiquing technology through a simple anarchist agency-framework (an approach to analysis and evaluation, informed by anarchist principles, which looks at how a given thing might either promote freedom and increase agency or reinforce domination and control) and a loose disability justice analysis, has led me to think that the all too common wholesale condemnation of new technology in and of itself, without actually digging into the roots of its possible implications in both directions – towards freedom or domination – is contrary to anarchist ethos.

The Luddites were right to attack the emergent industrialised textile industry, the exploitative context in which it necessarily gave birth, and the lifeways it threatened to extinguish in its owners' quest for endless accumulation. Yet within the technology of textile machinery, buried beneath the rapacious drive of capitalists consolidating power and enclosing the very lives of those they subjugated, there was latent liberatory potential; different but not dissimilar to that of the origins of the legacy of written language.

To be sure, for example, autonomous strip mining machinery is ipso facto a net negative but its horrors can't be myopically reduced to how such a technology robs workers who were doing the strip mining of their livelihoods – it needs to be thought of beyond the blinding economistic frame of the-now and placed into broader contexts. The communities of living beings, both human and non-human, destroyed through the act of strip mining, the resulting untold toll on humanity through the ceaseless patterns of constant overconsumption such industrial activity creates to justify its existence, the brutality it enacts both primarily and tangentially on ecosystems, on climates, etc, are why autonomous strip mining machinery is an inherently destructive tool of cisheteropatriarchal white supremacist capitalism: a net negative. Not only because of the jobs automation threatens.

2

Those who suffer socioeconomic oppression fuel a negative reaction to emergent technologies, since these technologies threaten their immediate financial security. However, it is possible to think beyond this framing and discover the potential of technology to lessen human suffering. For example, the manners in which assistive technology such as automated devices can be used to help individuals with disabilities with activities of daily living, such as dressing, eating, and bathing, how it can increase their independence and agency by allowing them to perform these tasks on their own, without the need for assistance from others, how it can in a broader context make certain services and products more accessible and affordable, should cause us to view unthinking attacks on emergent technology with scrutiny. How can we, in good faith, knee-jerk denounce something with such immense potential for increasing human dignity?

I believe technology as an abstract concept is neutral. To conclude that technology is wholesale negative for humanity is a philosophical non sequitur. By no means should technology be decontextualized from its social, political and its ecological implications. The webs of overlapping networks of interconnected contexts need to be considered. A notion of transhumanism (which generally seeks to enhance the human body and mind, intending to improve the human condition through such means as nanotech, artificial intelligence, etc, to augment physical and mental abilities, and improve health and well-being) confined wholly within hegemonic cisheteropatriarchal white supremacist capitalism is understandably fuel for cyberpunk nightmares. But I posit that this is true of the implementation of nearly all technology within this paradigm.

Through an anarchist approach – ethics and strategy – we can both attack and liberate through the use of a radical analysis. We can face unfurling (and sometimes frightening) complexity head-on without shrinking away from the ethos of aspiring toward ever-increasing degrees of freedom and autonomy for all living beings.

This is how an anarchist transhumanism is beginning to crystalize, with a commitment to use technology in the expansion of human freedom and happiness.

In some versions of the myth, Pandora's box also contains one crucially good thing: hope. According to the story, when Pandora opened the box, all the evils escaped and spread throughout the world, but hope remained inside, lying in wait, yet to be fully actualized. We might say that the Pandora's box of today's technology has long since been opened. In this case, to try to forgo technology altogether is to live in denial of what that box has released. However, if we can find the hope that remains, then we must hope to create a world that has been blessed, not cursed, by the contents of that box.