**Here be Monsters. Is Technology Reducing Humanity?**

Richard King, Monash University Press, 2023

Intro. The fetish of progress

What most proponents fail to appreciate are the social, economic and political considerations under which tech innovation occurs. We came to see ourselves as intricate, largely autonomous systems no different from complex machines. We began to see life in informational terms. ... This ethos of manipulation runs through the technosciences (15).

How do technologies relate to our fundamental humanity? (17) Some of the interventions entertained in Silicon Valley (SV) or the biotech sector would be dangerous if they came to fruition. More dangerous still is that we allow them to be entertained at all (21). Stephen Asma suggests that we interrogate technical developments as incubators of the worldview that allows technology hubris to reproduce and spread. ... The danger of seeing ourselves as machines to be re-wired... (23).

Chap 1: From meatspace to the metaverse

Neoliberalism (NL) views society as a giant calculating machine. Mason ‘submission to the market becomes a gateway for admission to the logic of the machine (42). The essential nihilism of Capitalism (is that it) reduces every object to the status of a commodity ... & ... empties it of any ‘sacred content’ it may have possessed (43).

Chap 2: Socrates in Cyberspace

N. Postman: Rise of the image is linked to the decline of moral argument. ... The constant flow of information ... turns us into spectators, passive consumers of info, rather than participants in the creation of knowledge (53). The idea of ‘imagined communities’ (also) increases the scope for intellectual contagion, and indeed, emotional contagion, in a way that allows imagined communities to come into being with incredible speed (59). Social media suited to the exploitation and connection of two forms of narcissism – the N of the popular leader and the N of his followers.

Even in the absence of tyranny, the effects of the internet and social media in politics (give) cause for concern. It is now an existential necessity (not to) cede control to technocrats et al ... The climate emergency ... is a mandate for concerted action and focus – for global solidarity (60). And yet, as the carbon economy trashes the capacity for life on Earth, the silicon economy trashes the capacity for intelligent and prolonged reflection that we need to rescue what remains of it. ... We need to put to rest the notion that there is any connection between the platforms and democracy (60-61). Socrates: the relationship between the form and the content of a communication technology is never straightforward.

When the bright young things of SV opine that ‘society’ should decide how their latest innovation is used, they are channelling the instrumentalist view of technology.... We are just here to build cool stuff! (But) we should be wary of this argument (as it) denies the extent to which techs play *a constitutive role* in human affairs. Hence Kranzberg: ‘tech is neither good nor bad, nor neutral’... Focusing on ideas is crucial (63).

Chap 3: The dangers of social distancing

‘Hurting people is easier with technology’ (72). All technologies colour the human ecology in ways that are not immediately obvious – they both affect, and are affected by, the political, social and cultural environment. ... Technologically advanced societies are increasingly governed by abstract rels. ... (These) may be taking us towards the kind of society that tuns counter to the social conditions necessary for a meaningful existence (73).

Taken as a moral system utilitarianism is stupid about humanity (74). The U worldview both reflects and reinforces the calculative ethos at the heart of technoscientific capitalism. Both self and society are reduced to algos (75).

Chap 4: Hacking humanity

Transhumanism. View that tech is seen as the measure of humanity’s progress – now deeply ingrained in ‘advanced’ societies. ... Google is determined to integrate humans and machines as far as possible, through the expanding range of ‘smart’ products... Human beings have always used tech to harness nature. But there is a big difference between harnessing natural forces and reconstituting nature itself (98).

What is the view of humanity on which technology is founded? A ‘clockwork universe.’ It focuses not on Why but How (and leads to) a loss of intrinsic value (102). Descartes notion of ‘substance dualism’ has led to some terrible ideas. The modern comparison between brain and computer is much more than a metaphor (103). BUT (there is) more to human thought than info processing. Computers only provide *the impression of intelligence* (105). Software – hardware dualism is part of a broader worldview in which everything is reduced to its smallest parts. Reductionism is inseparable from the desire to manipulate the natural world in far-reaching and fundamental ways (107).

Sci-Fi gets the danger backwards. Machines don’t threaten the future. Problem is that humanity sees everything in machine-like terms (109). Technoscience ‘reduces us.’ Therefore, we need a new holism that can challenge the atomistic vision of human society and human living inscribed in its ideology.

Chap 5: Off-target effects

Re: both Biotech and CRISPER (gene editor): need to distinguish between scientific method and science as a social process (114). Scientific autonomy is a long-standing myth. It has survived into the era of technoscience – and era in which science, utility and the market are ... interwoven, making it more dangerous than it ever was in the past. The characterisation of science as disinterested discovery disguises its social and economic underpinnings and keeps critical humanistic reflection at bay (125).

The incorporation of science into technoscientific capitalism puts enormous pressure on the institutions of oversight and ethical reflection, which find it increasingly difficult to keep pace with changing circumstances. ... The difficulty here is not incidental: it derives from the fact that when we talk about these issues from a moral and humanistic perspective, we are talking about our humanity and the opening up of a liminal space in which uncanny, even monstrous, versions of ourselves appear to be moving about in the shadows (126).

So transformative are the new techniques ... that it is necessary to keep them in the public sphere, away from the system of patents and profits (133). !!! Human beings ... are NOT objects of design but beings with dignity, ends in themselves (136).

Chap 6: Project cyborg

Drawbacks of big history. Human culture and history are acknowledged but only as a secondary consideration. (But it is) popular in SV (145-6). For Kurzweil and the ‘new immortals’ technical development is a neutral quantity. But leaves out the very human qualities – reflection, judgement, caution, wisdom – that shape our way of being in the world and living in community with others (147). (Musk, et al’s) ‘Neurolink’ undermines the conditions for human freedom and human flourishing by obliterating physical distance and physical proximity at a single stroke (150). The idea of progress is clearly ideological, a projection of the system to which entrepreneurs are wedded (151).

Chap 7: Antidote: Pharma and human flourishing

THE GREAT REVERSAL (168). The spectacle of massive corporations competing to sell us back the peace of mind we have lost ... begins to look a little sick (169).

Moral enhancement / reasoning. Not some cool bit of software that is uploaded to the brain and allowed to run. It is an ongoing, peculiarly human act performed in negotiation with others (175). The end of Agency?

Chap 8: The black box society. Tech and the assault on agency

Summary quote. As tech has gained in power and reach, our sense of its significance in human affairs has not undergone a similar expansion; in some respects we are even less likely to question its role than we were in the past. ... The situation is also dangerous: only a society awake to the reality of technological transformation can hope to exert some modicum of control over the tools that now exert control over us (181).

Indistinguishable from magic. When the world becomes a black box – opaque to its inhabitants – our agency is undermined (187). Externalised tools are very different are very different to tools of extension (187). Jacquard’s Revenge. – THE TELEOLOGY OF PROGRESS. A ‘conceptual shredder’ eliminating from the human story the struggle between ideas and peoples in favour of a purely physical account of energy flows and increasing complexity. (However) a glance at actual history reveals that technical innovation is bound up with power and the power of capital in particular. ... A system of work that was, in itself, a machine (Mumford. 190-91). Do artifacts have politics? Yes – in that they attest to and reproduce a particular form of power. It removes from human beings an outlet for their creative agency in a way that goes against the grain of their nature. The principal problem of capitalism is that it is bound to seek high private returns rather than high social ones. ... It is the special contribution of the algorithm to have dimmed the lights as never before (193) on our way through the world of things. Our broad trajectory is toward OPACITY

Democratic Technics. A notion of freedom that fails to put agency front and centre is now politically inadequate given the power and penetration of new and emerging technologies (197). (We need to) recognise that technologies are inherently political and therefore need to push back against authoritarian technics.

Chap 9: Breaking the frame

The problems identified here are not problems of technology per se but our relation to the techs and our tendency to ‘read’ them across to other facts of human existence (Mumford, 204). Need for a fundamental break (because) the technosciences require a vision of humanity as the kind of thing that can be redesigned (206). Capitalism was always a monstrous phenomenon (206).

The most salient and interesting thing about human beings is that it is in their nature to have a culture (207). (However) the threats arising from technoscience systems (involve) an alternative idea of human freedom and flourishing (is required based on) a radically new relationship to technology (209). The human scale vs the fantasy of ‘sustainable growth. ’The basic contradiction between infinite growth and a finite planet is now so stark that a broad downscaling of production and consumption is an existential necessity (210). (RS: Tell that to the marketing industry!) Climate change deniers are now largely marginalised at the higher levels of global governance ... but it is inarguable that a softer form of denialism – a sort of mainstream cognitive dissonance – now dominates our thinking about the environment’ (211).

The tipping point (in essence requires) a more rounded vision of humanity (213). Treating the symptoms of climate change rather than its root cause ... would be giving free reign to technoscientific capitalism, accepting that there is little wrong with the worldview that brought us to this calamitous point (214). Separately and in combination, technoscience and capitalism present us with a view of the world that caused us to not only plunder it with little regard for its natural limits, but also to mislabel ourselves as in some sense separate from the nature that formed us (215).

Becoming techo-critical (217). Need to think seriously about the role of digital technologies in schools etc ... Some form of social ownership of key technologies seems essential if we are to prevent a dystopic future (2218-9). Mainstream media has bought into the idea that techs are *only tools* and as such substantially *outside* politics. (Hence) we need to think differently about, more radically, about technology. Only when we recognise that the climate crisis as a part of a broader, deeper crisis, of technoscientific capitalism, and technoscientific capitalism as at odds with fundamental aspects of our being, will we be intellectually and spiritually equipped for the changes that need to occur (220). Afterword. It is not sentient machines that should worry us, but desensitised human beings (232).