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The Nature of the Left

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Marx considered industry the “open book of human essential forces.” Nowhere on the Left is this formulation refuted. Its origins, logic, destination are taken for granted. We find here, in fact, a core assumption that unites leftists: that the means of production/technology should be progressively developed, its reach always extended. This notion is very close to the heart of the modern conception of progress. All of life must yield to its imperative.

Domination of nature and domestication are in no way problematic for the Left. Leftists fail to notice that this accounts, in a fundamental way, for the Left’s sorry record in practice concerning both the natural world and the individual.

Like other defenders of civilization and modernity, leftists uphold the “neutrality” of technology. They cling to this credo even as the horrors of genetic engineering, human cloning, the cyborg future for the self, etc. unfold for all to see. Soon, apparently, a wholly mediated and artificial reality will arrive, with the virtual/digital erasure of direct experience itself. Modern industrial “medicine”, for example, is on course to dispense with human contact altogether.

But no matter, this development is “neutral”; it all depends on how it is used or who is in power. As if these innovations weren’t hugely estranging and destructive processes in themselves.

Technology embodies the dominant values of the social order where it resides. It is inseparable from those values and is their physical expression. Technology becomes a system, as its society becomes a system. At a fairly early stage of the development of division of labor (specialization), tools become technology. Where once there were autonomous, equal individuals and tools accessible to all, the effective power of experts gradually takes over, promoting social hierarchy. Division of labor is a fundamental motor of complex, stratified, alienated society, today as from the beginning.

The Left doesn’t question this basic institution that drives all the rest, and so must repeat the dominant lie about the neutrality of technology. In this way the Left works continually for the preservation of the values and the society that produce ever more powerful and oppressive technology.

Globalization is not only the cutting edge of the world system of domination; it also represents division of labor at the global level. The Left, of course, takes even this for granted, opposing only the excesses of certain policies, not globalization itself. Thus “Against Globophobia,” (*The Nation*, December 1, 2003) rails against those of us who do oppose it, e.g. “This might be a good time to junk local self-reliance as an ideal and embrace a deeply global perspective.” The current bible of the Left, Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000), is at least as committed to contemporary society’s mainstays of productionism, technology, and the basic world system. This system is stamping out all difference, including indigenous lifeways, in favor of standardization and global homogeneity.

In his *Mirror of Production* (1972), Jean Baudrillard showed that marxism (and all of the modern Left) is just the mirror image of capital’s techno-economic essentials. Even earlier, Walter Benjamin understood that “mass production is the production of masses.”

The Left is not radical and really never was. Its adherents challenge none of the underlying givens of this rotten, massified anti-life world. On the contrary, the Left — including the anarchist Left — defends them all. What leftists do oppose is a qualitatively different vision, in the direction of decentralized, face-to-face, small-scale community where individual responsibility makes division of labor and domination obsolete, and human anarchy is part of nature.