Everywhere and Nowhere

The Pathology of the Machine

Kevin Tucker

> "In order to rationalize our industrial-military complex, we have to destroy our capacity to see clearly any more what is in front of, and to imagine what is beyond, our noses." — R.D. Laing[1]
>
> "There's no light at the end of the Carpal Tunnel." — Bob Black[2]

Technology is about taking. It always has been and always will be.

Whether we're talking about relatively regional civilizations or our global civilization, the irrigation canals of Cahokia or the tanks of the U.S. Army, technology is about a system that always requires more. More fuel, more resources, more operators, more consumers, more attention, more devotion: more everything and anything.

And that excess comes from somewhere. Somewhere and everywhere there are 'necessary evils' (work, rent, bills, war), but we overlook them. We see it as give and take: we work, they give us toys, we spend more hours working to make more money to buy things that are supposed to save us time, we pour into this system, this technological system, so that we can get stuff in return. So that we can take part in history in the making: we can internalize the Machine and its Progress. It becomes our pride, it gives us meaning while it takes it away, and it becomes our basis for identity.

Technology is power materialized. Without taking and giving something very real, that is things you can see, feel, hear, and smell, the domesticators would have never been able to enact the power their gods only spoke of. Like god, technology became something to fear and love. It became another thing to turn to so that we don't see, feel, hear, and sense the world of and around us. From the steel plow to self-heating coffee mugs, we become absorbed by the technological system.

And we're blinded by the halogen light. The larger the system, the less able we are of seeing the consequences. We don't see where the taking is or where the losses are. But we don't have to look far for either. We just have to learn how to look and step back to see outside of the mass produced visions of the domesticators, to walk away from the 24-hour neon crucifix, power locks

[1] RD Laing, The Politics of Experience. New Jersey: Pantheon, 1967. Pgs. 57–58.

[2] Bob Black, Anarchy after Leftism. Columbia: CAL Press, 1997.

and heated seats to understand the nature of the machine: it must grow and it must absorb or eliminate everything that stands before it.

Through this absorption, our communities, our world and our being are what is being taken away. We are absorbed into something larger than our selves, larger than our bioregionally rooted minds and cultures, and drawn into the fate of a self-destructive culture.

On April 12, 1893 in the arid lands of southern Africa, the technological system laid one of many monuments to its own efficiency. A camp of 90 Witbooi women, children and some men was sleeping as the sun arose. As they slept the colonizing German army crept up to deliver their final compromise in the struggle over the land that those Witbooi and their ancestors had lived on for thousands of years: a struggle immersing from two cultures who would have never known about each other only decades before.

In a matter of 30 minutes, 16,000 rounds were fired from 200 rifles, laying the entire camp to rest.[3] The Gatling gun, in its 32nd year of existence, made colonization a much faster and more efficient ordeal. The expanding German Empire and the globalizing European civilization which spawned it needed more resources. And more must always come from somewhere. On that day, the 'somewhere' was in southern Africa, which today remains one of the largest suppliers of such technological necessities as gold and diamonds. The 90 Witbooi killed just happened to stand in the way.

That same year the motion picture made its premiere.

Take and give.

If anyone is familiar with the consequences of technology, the ones we are psychologically incapable of comprehending, they are those who have historically lived without it. That is earth based cultures, the gatherer-hunters, the small scale horticulturalists, and minor pastoralists.

These are societies who are no stranger to tool use (like most animals). But tools are different. Made from stone, wood, bone, and hide, they can be and are by necessity, mechanically simple. They require skill and knowledge over resources. A knapped flint blade leaves behind smaller pieces of flint, not industrial waste. This kind of tool use is reflective of their cultures which can face any amount of ecological and social turbulence, but are lasting.

That is, are lasting so long as they aren't destroyed by another culture. One which, as one Huaorani man put it: "killed by destroying the source of all life".[4] From flourishing through thousands of years, these are cultures faced most recently with the threat of extermination at the hands of a techno-industrial civilization reaching back less than two centuries. Ethnocide, or culture-death, for the Huaorani is just one cost "for the sake of enough oil to meet U.S. energy needs for thirteen days".[5]

Thirteen days, one country for one culture.

It would be worse if it weren't an isolated case. Indigenous communities throughout Northern America face ethnocide, removal, and genocide to make way for coal, uranium, copper, gold, silver, bauxite, molybdenum, and zeolite mines, oil and natural gas, logging, dams, and their homes are turned into locations for power plants and waste sites.[6] Trains and guns were once used to exterminate buffalo herds to deprive plains Indians, now toxic waste turn fish into carcinogens,

[3] Mark Cocker, Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold. New York: Grove, 1998. Pgs. 3–4.

[4] Joe Kane, Savages. New York: Vintage, 1996. Pg. 7.

[5] Ibid, pg. 5.

[6] Ward Churchill, Struggle for the Land. Winnipeg: Arbiter Ring, 1999. Donald Grinde and Bruce Johansen, Ecocide of Native America. Santa Fe: Clear Light, 1995.

global warming melts ice sheets and drowns polar bears, and lead contamination from strip mines makes ground water lethal.

You have the same story throughout the world. Before urban development stretched into the Amazon, colonization came through road building to clear land for ranchers and to harvest rubber trees, bringing in logging and mining, and, more recently massive hydro-electric dams.[7] What started in Asia, Northern Africa and Europe spread throughout the world as technology became more advanced and continually required more to carry on: to carry on the process of growth and expansion. It moves, uprooting communities along the way, leaving processed and domesticated grains, morality and clothing, and steel tools in its wake.

Taking and giving. Rising and falling.

Destroying to produce nothingness.

And for what? What are the benefits of this great and mighty system that can turn the earth into another thing, another consumable and rejectable object?

We try to justify what we've gotten from the process. And so called radicals have even tried to save those positives from the rest of the technological system. But while they agree that colonization and destruction like that talked about above is horrid and, they believe, unnecessary elements of a technological society, they ignore the reality of technology: it destroys in far more ways than one.

Some of the worst damage wrought by the technological system is what it does to our minds. As the ever expanding boundaries of the technological reality spread out and connect with more people, the more we become enmeshed in the system, and the more isolated we become.

Humans, like all animals, are bioregional and communal by nature. We need community and the way earth based cultures live promotes this. Technology is about isolation: the system demands specialization. To produce a 'labor saving' technology like steel tools, iron must be mined, the ore must be smelted and it must be reshaped into something useful. Those doing the mining, smelting, reshaping, or those involved in the shipping or distributing of the materials or the finished product, or those doing the bartering or selling of that product, aren't likely to be the ones putting it to use if it is a plow or something used directly in the production of food. There is a new distance that is created and the person selling those tools isn't going to see the same amount of destruction that the miner will see on a daily basis or notice the consequences of that mine like someone directly involved with providing food will. Nor will they necessarily know about the use of other steel tools in clearing out more land for more mines.

That kind of disconnect is inherent in the system. And the psychological disconnect is the same. In earth based communities, culture is shaped over hundreds and thousands of years and is inseparable from the lack of mediation from the earth and from each other. These cultures have adapted responses and methods for dealing with any problems that are likely to arise.

Let's look at warfare. Warfare is something particular to domesticated societies, whether they are earth based or not. Nomadic gatherer-hunters lack warfare because they are freer from concepts of territoriality and without dependence on rooted gardens or storehouses, can simply move, split up or merge with surrounding camps during times of ecological hardship. There is little to be staked out and defended and, even more importantly, with looser kin and social relationships between bands, even less to defend against. Kin based identity becomes more important

[7] Linda Rabben, Unnatural Selection. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998. John Bodley, Victims of Progress. Menlo Park: Cummings, 1975.

only when gardens and storehouses and their surrounding hunting territory arise. That is, when people become rooted to a particular spot to the point that its use by others is competitive rather than collective.

As societies settle, or become domesticated, scarcity becomes a problem. The more dependent a society becomes on particular plants, animals, or weather patterns, the more they have to fear. If a horticulturalist village expands and its neighbors are expanding or aren't moving, then eventually there will be a problem.

There's an ecological term for this: carrying capacity. Carrying capacity is how much life can be supported by any given bioregion at any particular time. But it's more than an ecological concept; it's the reality that every living being must answer to if they push too far. And that does happen from time to time. It doesn't have to be a major issue, but some human societies created a larger problem because storing and domesticating foods bends carrying capacity. That makes a village possible where a band had previously only camped before.

This is not without consequence. The bioregion and what is grown or taken from it becomes a resource and others are competitors. And this begins the cycles of war that characterize domesticated societies. Though domesticated, small scale horticultural and pastoral societies are still earth based; they are still without a technological system such as metal tools, irrigation and urbanization. The kind of social and ecological stresses they feel are hardly abstract: there are too many mouths to feed on too little land. War, in the form of raids or battles, is the initial response, and becomes a primary occupation of the culture at large. A preference for male warriors leads to higher rates of female infanticide, revenge for lives lost in battle spur raids, and the result is less mouths to feed and the occasional shattering of villages into new places or to be absorbed by other villages.[8]

You see this happening over and over again in horticultural and pastoral societies from South America through North America, Africa, Eurasia, Polynesia, and Micronesia.

Brutal as it might sound, this is the culture that these societies have grown into and the one they have and will continue to fight to maintain. But we're kidding ourselves when we think that this is somehow an archaic arrangement. As the death toll in Iraq has well passed 20,000 lives lost, we should consider the words of a more open U.S. President Jimmy Carter in response to attacks in 1980 on what he called one of the "vital interests of the United States of America", the Persian Gulf and its oil: attacks "will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."[9] That's a response that the U.S. and other oil hungry countries have surely not backed away from. We could just as easily point to villages bulldozed and fenced off in Mexico that force a move and dependence on Maquilladoras, or sweat shops with company stores and their debt, or to the plight of the eastern Cougar, or to any number of the places mentioned earlier.

The eternal somewhere, nowhere and everywhere: the shit fields of the technological system.

At least the warring horticulturalists know whose blood is on their hands.

[8] This can be observed from nearly any ethnography on horticulturalists and pastoralists. A few cases that have elaborated on it as such are; Roy Rappaport, Pigs for the Ancestors (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1984), Kenneth Good, Into the Heart (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), Andrew Vayda, Maori Warfare (New Plymouth, NZ: Avery Press, 1960) and Warfare in Ecological Perspective (New York: Plenum Press, 1976), Marvin Harris, Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches (New York: Vintage, 1989), and is further elaborated in my book-inprogress, Catalyst: the birth and death of civilization.

[9] Quoted in Michael Klare, Resource Wars. New York: Henry Holt, 2002. Pg. 4.

But we have more in common with the horticulturalists and pastoralists than their cycles of warfare: they too have suffered the consequences of modern technology.

The mediation, the distance and isolation of technology is about more than just pulling us away from the rest of the world. It is about uprooting our community and bioregionally defined being from its very essence. The result is a blood thirsty, unchecked insanity. Like Joseph Conrad's Col. Kurtz, we destroy because nothing is stopping us. Technology turns our hearts to the darkness it creates.

For artic hunters, like the Inuit, technology turned the vitally communal seal hunts into a solitary act where the only companionship a hunter has is with his gun and outboard motor. He returns to smaller and smaller camps, in many places even the dogs are replaced by snowmobiles. Community disappears and culture becomes a warped mirror of what it once was.[10] Depression reigns, canned foods bring the highest rate of diabetes in any human population, and the tools that one artic hunter used can be seen on display in places like the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Where the bastard godchildren of industrialists can see relics of the community they're searching for, but never able to see.

The gun, the imported food in steel cans, the outboard engine and its oil.

Harpoons, dog sleds, community, seal skin kayaks.

Giving and taking.

The Carnegie Museum built its altar to the gods of Progress on soil stained in the blood of the technological system. Like the artic, it is the place where culture was and is being killed by forced relocation and an influx of technology. But unlike the artic hunters, the lives of the Monongahela were not lost to any direct trade. They were horticulturalists, like the Erie to the north, the Susquehannocks to the east and the nations of the Haudousaunee to the Northeast.

Like the other horticulturalists we've looked at already, there was a rough pattern of affinity and warring that created a rather static state of existence throughout what would be called the northeastern United States. You had these cycles of war, kept in check by a degree of inefficient weaponry and the lack of mediation that the faceless warfare technology makes possible.

That changed in the early 1600's.

The growing, stratified technological system of Western Europe was expanding and needed more resources. Sadly the invention of quicker transportation over water made it possible for the dense populations of cod in the Atlantic coast to be caught, stored and sold in shops in Britain. The fishers began setting up inland camps where they met local Algonkians: a people with no technology, but a sudden interest in what these fishers had to offer. The fishers took an equal interest in the furs of the natives and set in motion one of the most tragic stories of our history: the American Fur trade.

The new steel tools and other mass produced junk of Empire flooded into Algonkian hands at the expense of a demand for furs that the natives had neither known nor had to deal with before. The rough boundaries and alliances of a quickly declining era were radically altered by the demand for trapping grounds and another resource war took place. But unlike past wars, there was a new element: the gun.

The gun, like the trades, created a new kind of society where power was granted by property and trade alone and where age old affiliations and kin networks were tossed aside to recreate a mirror of European politics. A new kind of political economy emerged as European nations used

[10] NOVA, Hunters of the Seal [film]. 1978.

the natives as pawns for their own ongoing territorial battles. The Iroquoian Empire was created by the British in 1677 to stake a rightful claim of discovery against the French. While Europeans battled this out, it was native blood being spilled.

Technology is the key factor: the age old system of alliances and war kept things in check, but there was no precedent for the kind of damage technology could inflict. There was never a reason to create checks against a technology that never existed before and so the natives had no way to realize or cope with the nature of technology until it was far too late. Too late came quickly: by 1660, every Iroquois who could own a gun did. And in a war of the Iroquois against the Susquehannock over access to central Pennsylvania into Ohio for trapping, the Erie and Monongahela were wiped out between 1630 and 1680.

They never had to meet a European to fall victim to the consequences of their technological system.[11]

And for the Iroquois themselves, the dependence on the new technology caused a break up in bands into smaller kin groups and warrior sects. The loss of culture and community allowed the missionaries that followed in the footsteps of the fishers to finish the civilizing that guns and steel tools had started.

This unfolds over and over again throughout the world where cultural traditions clash with the technology of modernity. For the notorious Amazonian horticulturalists, the Yanomami, access to steel tools became the primary motivation for the warfare that won them the title of 'the Fierce People' and became the subject of sociobiological arguments for aggressiveness as the basis for humanity. No doubt, the irony of the situation has still never fully come to light.[12]

And that clash has taken on more literal terms.

The Maori of New Zealand are one example. Their culture is the product of a system of fishing, hunting, and horticulture that created a heavy dependence on surplus. Social stratification was firmly rooted in a highly divided society where kings and religions leaders could not even be touched by impure hands or tools. Like any society where the socio-political elite are untouchable, the same will apply for their gods.

In the early 1800s, muskets became a normalized part of the Maori warfare complex. But, like with the Iroquois, that distribution was never equal. Politicians would take powerful Maori warrior-chiefs on world tours and school them in the European political-war system. In one case, one Maori chief got 300 guns with ample ammo from a sympathetic British commander resulting in the death toll of over 2,000 enemy Maori with an equal number taken as slaves from a 3 month campaign.[13]

But before the guns were even efficient in themselves, they pulled on the traditional culture and ideas of gods for their power. As anthropologist Andrew Vayda observed, guns gave advantage in warfare "not so much because of the numbers killed…as because of the panic affected as a result by killing any of them." He continues: "when defenders heard the noise of the guns without, as far as they could see, having been struck, they concluded that supernatural forces were at work."[14]

This is an important point. As I said earlier, the warfare of earth based cultures was never faceless. The changing pattern of affiliations and war still had enemies, but they were known

[11] Eric Wolf, Europe and the People without History. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. Francis Jennings, The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire. New York: W.W. Norton, 1984.

[12] R. Brian Ferguson, Yanomami Warfare. Santa Fe: SAR Press, 1995.

[13] Andrew Vayda, Maori Warfare. Pgs. 91–2.

[14] Ibid. Pg. 60

enemies. The consequence of killing was rooted in cultural understandings of what happens to the dead and how they are to be avenged. But what constitutes killing is also culturally defined. If someone is killed by a spear, arrow or through witchcraft, everyone knows what is going on and what is going to happen. You respond in kind.

Technology, being outside of the realm of direct experience and relationships, challenges this. The pastoral/horticultural Nuer of Sudan now know this too well. Guns flooded their culture as Nuer boys and men were drafted as soldiers in the SPLA, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army. That is, as a part of a violent nation-state turned ethnic war created by European nations battling for control over the region. The guns, not surprisingly, brought an extreme upsurge in Nuer homicide and the loss of culture. Not necessarily through killing alone, but because the technology is so alien to their long standing cultural understandings of the world: ones patterned by hundreds of years of bioregional and ecological influence.

Nuer responses and accountability for homicide were a part of their elaborately outlined spiritual world. It involved consequences for the deceased, the murderer and their cattle. But this was all tied to one thing: the Nuer concept of killing. The death of Nuer, by other Nuer or outsiders, had no place in their cosmology: there was no understanding of where this left the living or the dead. Like the Iroquoian warriors, this opened the door for the missionaries.[15]

Souls lost to the machine, taken again by the god that built them.

Genocide, ethnocide, omnicide: is it shocking to know that Sudan is one vital source for the Nile River? That is, the land the Nuer live on is the primary source for the most valued resource in northeastern Africa: water.[16] The very building block of life becomes another resource, another reason to take lives. All for industry. All for Progress. All to feed the Machine.

From the view of the modernizers and the technocrats, you have to give to take. And this is what we and those being taken from are told we are all seeing.

The necessary evils. The broken eggs of Progress.

And ultimately the salvation of the Machine.

It's easy to look at these things and see them as a tragic misconception or faults of indigenous societies to stop their complacency in their ethnocide and genocide. We can look at these 'downsides' of technology in use or ignore the relationship between all of this and the necessary expansion of the technological system.

But if we think that we are any different or any more prepared to deal with technology, then Stanley Milgram proved us wrong.

Milgram was a social psychologist with a particular interest in obedience. His interests led to what would become one of the most controversial experiments and analysis of the last century. The experiment brought in random people who were, as they would believe, going to give another experimental subject a series of electrical shocks as dictated by the conductor of the experiment. The person receiving the shocks was an actor who would respond how any person would if given the relative amount of electrocution: from initial reactions along the lines of 'what is going on here' to protests to agonizing screams. What Milgram found was shocking: nearly all the subjects would give strong to extremely intense shocks before they would refuse to give them as told and twice as many would carry on if the actor was further away, but could still be heard.[17]

[15] Sharon Hutchinson, Nuer Dilemmas. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

[16] Klare, Resource Wars.

[17] Stanley Milgram, Obedience to Authority. New York: Harper, 1975.

The experiment was focused on obedience to authority, but there are two things in particular that apply to this subject: the authority granted to the experimenter through their technology and the disconnection between the person giving the shocks and the screams of the victim through the technology.

You don't need a lab to remind ourselves of how powerful these things are. When some technology exists, it is treated as something that just is and always will be. In a fatalistic sense, it is accepted as a part of reality. Genetic engineering, for example, gets its share of protest, but little to no outrage, even as diseases have nearly doubled in the short period since they've become widely used. We could look even closer to everyday technologies like sewage systems and garbage. We don't think about what happens when we can simply toss things to the curb or in a dumpster. We don't have to think about how the psycho-active sedatives that are so widely taken are being pissed out and run back into the water supply with no method of filtration for them. That goes back into the rivers, lakes, streams and oceans and finds its way back into the soil. Nor are we confronted with the consequences of household chemicals, like fertilizers, insecticides and fungicides which anyone in most countries could go to the store and pick up and spray outside at anytime. Nor do we think about the coal plants, strip mines, nuclear power plants and the carnage they reap when we flip on a switch.

We can wonder and be philosophically opposed, but these things are all just there. And their presence alone grants them a kind of authority that comes with the fatalistic view that's been instilled in our minds. The necessary evils haunt us into inaction. They are the electric lullaby.

And it is the distance that a technological system that makes it possible for us to go on ignoring all of this. To continue acting like there are no consequences for our actions while everyday life remains an on going catastrophe.

Milgram was interested in the study of obedience for a particular reason: are there evil and good people, or are people just following orders. What he saw from Hitler's concentration camps, Stalin's gulags, and, at that time, the ongoing war in Vietnam disturbed him. And what he learned through interviews with those who took part in this wholesale destruction of life brings us back to the essence of technology: in order to inflict pain directly, they had to "counteranthropomophorize" their victims. That is they had to remove any human qualities from the people they would be destroying.

And there is another fitting term for this: reification, the process of turning life into 'things', lifeless objects. This is exactly what the technological system does, and exactly what the domesticators teach us to do. We must be disconnected from our being to cause this kind of destruction. No full being could ever tolerate this loss just as how we cannot comprehend what is really being lost.

So long as we are plugged in, we will never be able to come to this understanding.

As the Iroquois and Maori unwittingly took part in the destruction of their culture, we unwittingly take part in the destruction of life, the uprooting of communities, and the dismemberment of our being.

This is the technological system. This is the consequence of its necessary disconnection.

And this is what we are given in return for a wholeness that we can no longer even contemplate.

It is a whole package that cannot be taken in parts. There is no good and bad technology: just as there are no consequence-free actions. We are thrown into a global world that we are psychologically incapable of understanding, where destruction is out of sight and out of mind.

But our bioregional, communal selves still lurk beneath the machinery. We are not different. And we can't wait any longer for a nice way to slowly turn the power off on this system or to try and put it to good use. The switch will never be willingly flipped.

It is up to us to pull the plug and let the system collapse.

Footnotes:

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