



Transhumanism: The Dominant Ideology Of The Fourth Industrial Revolution

Description

This excellent paper from a French Professor of political science concluded that “transhumanism is already a dominant ideology, as it crushes all other ideological positions regarding technological change.” Technocracy and Transhumanism are like Siamese twins joined at the ideological hip. ? TN Editor

Introduction

In this volume dedicated to transhumanism, it is important to slip in, however furtively, a few words from political science. In essence, political science is the study of power relations and how they are justified and contested. Viewed from this perspective, “transhumanism” takes on a crucial significance. In fact, transhumanist thought is all about transcending our “natural” human condition by embracing cutting-edge technologies. The movement has already passed through various stages of development, after first emerging in the early 1980s—although “transhumanist” as an adjective was deployed as early as 1966 by the Iranian-American futurist Fereidoun M. Esfandiary, then a lecturer at the New School of Social Research in New York, and in works by Abraham Maslow (*Toward a Psychology of Being*, 1968) and Robert Ettinger (*Man into Superman*, 1972). However, it was Esfandiary’s conversations with the artist Nancie Clark, John Spencer of the Space Tourism Society, and, later, the British philosopher Max More (born Max O’Connor) in southern California that prompted the first attempts to unify these ideas into a coherent whole. Esfandiary’s renown had grown rapidly since he changed his legal name, becoming the enigmatic FM-2030, while Clark decided she would henceforth be known by the alias Natasha Vita-More, and went on to pen the Transhumanist Arts Statement in 1982.

Within about ten years, the movement had drawn in a clutch of academic philosophers such as the Swede Nick Bostrom, who lectures at the University of Oxford, the Brits David Pearce and Richard Dawkins, and the American James Hughes. By now, it had gathered sufficient critical mass to be taken seriously in academic debate. Meanwhile, a strand of political activism was beginning to make itself heard, initially through specialist journals like *Extropy* (first published in 1988) and the *Journal of Transhumanism*. A number of national and international associations were then formed, including the

Extropy Institute (1992), the World Transhumanist Association (1998, rebranded as Humanity+ in 2008), Technoprog in France, the Associazione Italiana Transumanisti in Italy, Aleph in Sweden, and Transcedo in the Netherlands. This political activism was organized entirely online, through a multitude of discussion forums, email newsletters, and the once-highly anticipated biennial conference, Extro.

In recent years, transhumanism has become markedly politicized, invigorated by the arrival of the first political parties on a mission to influence decision-making and political agendas. In the United States, the Transhumanist Party fielded a candidate, Zoltan Istvan, in the 2016 presidential election. The United Kingdom has a party of the same name, while Germany has the Transhumane Partei. Next came private universities entirely devoted to the transhumanist cause—Google’s Singularity University was founded in California in 2008, and the camp near Aix-en-Provence opened its doors in late 2017—and various private institutes and foundations, including the XPRIZE Foundation and the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies. Numerous civil society groups also sprang up around the world.

I – A political ideology

By this point, transhumanism has grown into a fairly coherent and substantiated doctrine. Not satisfied with explaining the present, transhumanists are eager to promote an explicit and detailed program for societal change. Transhumanism now has all the characteristics of a genuine political ideology and, therefore, is a legitimate target for ideological criticism (Ideologiekritik), as one of the “legends which [. . .] pose claims to authority by giving [social domination] the appearance of legitimacy,” while playing “an important role in the defense, stabilization and improvement of all those advantages, which are ultimately hitched to the standing of ruling groups.”¹ First introduced by the French philosopher Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy in his 1817 work *Éléments d’idéologie*,² the concept of ideology is still understood as a system “of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify ends and means of organized social action.”³ This is despite the pronounced differences in how it has been conceptualized by, for example, Gramsci, Mannheim, Althusser, Poulantzas, and Habermas, differences on which we cannot linger here. The emphasis is therefore on how ideologies serve to justify the goals and strategies of political action. We step into the realm of ideology whenever we encounter an “ism”: liberalism, socialism, environmentalism, nationalism, feminism, fascism, and so on, all conveyed as truly transnational movements of ideas and offering political actors a conceptual framework for their actions, now played out on a globalized stage.⁴ As Antonio Gramsci put it, ideologies “‘organize’ the human masses, they establish the ground on which humans move, become conscious of their position, struggle, etc.”⁵

The normative dimension of transhumanism, initially expressed through an ethical and legal debate on the lines to be drawn around technological progress, particularly in genetics⁶ and neuroscience, then spread to the societal debate on all future technological change. Transhumanists argued that we should aspire to transcend the human condition, working toward a genetically and neurologically modified posthuman being, fully integrated with machines. While this development would happen slowly, step by step, it would be a “proactive” project and therefore contrary to the precautionary principle.⁷ Their vision calls for a headlong rush forward, on the premise that human beings are encumbered by biological limits that prevent us from effectively taking on the challenges of an

increasingly complex world. The logical way forward is therefore to expand our capabilities by integrating all sorts of emerging technologies, or even programming ourselves in such a way that we eventually become posthuman. It is the true culmination of the agenda outlined in Jürgen Habermas's classic 1968 essay, *Technology and Science as Ideology*.⁸ Very often, the objectives of “technoprophets” (to borrow Dominique Lecourt's term)⁹ take on a gnostic quality that verges on the religious,¹⁰ insofar as numerous authors come across as true converts to the belief in the possibility of achieving immortality, or even reanimating the dead with advanced technology after a spell in a cryogenic state. Media favorite Laurent Alexandre calls this “the death of death.”¹¹

The political goal is perfectly transparent. What we are talking about is nothing less than the creation of a new human being¹² and, therefore, of an entirely new society—just as past ideologies (communism, fascism, etc.) aspired to do in other (ultimately less radical) ways. Of course, this transnational political movement contains pronounced ideological differences in terms of the technologies to be prioritized and the strategies to be pursued, particularly between “technoproggressives” (such as James Hughes, Marc Roux, and Amon Twyman), who take a more egalitarian view of the path to the posthuman condition,¹³ and “extropians” or “technolibertarians” (such as Max More and Zoltan Istvan), who believe that refining and augmenting our capabilities through technology should be a matter of individual choice and financial means, even if that leads to acute inequality or, worse, a technological caste system.¹⁴ However, these are merely internal political struggles between different sensibilities¹⁵; all factions are in complete agreement on the basic tenets of transhumanism.

Transhumanist thought can be broken down into three main premises, each with an eminently political intent:

1. Human beings in their “natural” state are obsolete and ought to be enhanced by technology, which then becomes a means of artificially extending the hominization process. Thus, transhumanism sweeps human taxonomy into the political arena. An observation by Michel Foucault, written in 1976, comes to mind: “What might be called a society's ‘threshold of modernity’ has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. [. . .] Modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.”¹⁶ In other words, transhumanists believe we have a duty to replace the category of human with a new creature, a post-sapiens sapiens. We would potentially find ourselves, in zoological terms, at a moment of speciation: an extreme situation when a new species peels off and steps forward to join the animal kingdom.

2. The goal is full hybridization between the posthuman being and the machine, something that goes far beyond the human–machine interface we know today (from interacting with cell phones and computers, for example). The mind-boggling image of a human–machine hybrid suggests a permanent integration, frequently talked up by one of transhumanism's most prominent ideologists, Ray Kurzweil. Kurzweil believes that human beings should become an intrinsic part of the machine, that we should be (re)programmable like software.¹⁷ This is the logical outcome of the postwar cybernetic movement's machinist fetishism, epitomized by Norbert Wiener and a circle of other mathematicians and philosophers.¹⁸ It proposes nothing less than full submission to technical rationality, our human subjectivity suppressed. From this point on, technology, viewed as the new agent of hominization, paradoxically becomes the main instrument of dehumanization. Transhumanist machinism turns out to be fundamentally antihumanist—not least because the machine is by definition inhuman.

3. This would have us transcend not only our humanity but also what we might call the basic

ideological matrix that underlies many other ideologies (liberalism, socialism, conservatism, etc.), namely, humanism, which brings together all our ways of understanding ourselves as human beings at the center of the world and at the top of the species pyramid. While humanists believe that individuals can achieve moral growth through education and culture (the “humanization of man”), transhumanist ideology proffers an altogether new set of values, insisting on the necessity of transitioning to a posthuman species capable of continuous self-enhancement by integrating new technological components. In a sense, technology obviates the need for moral, educational, or cultural effort.

From these three premises, transhumanist ideology splinters into a variety of discursive fields, each inspired by some new invention that will speed us on our way to the sunlit uplands of the future.¹⁹ We see one such field developing around the controversial technique of human genetic manipulation. In the summer of 2017, a team of researchers in the United States achieved the first successful modification of the human genome, using the CRISPR-Cas9 method to extirpate a hereditary heart condition.²⁰ The day will come when this technique is fully developed and authorized for use, even if only in a single country. A single procedure will be enough to remove all risk of a genetic disorder in every generation descended from the embryo. It is, then, a bona fide form of reproductive genetic enhancement. In this case, as in others, medicine acts as an outrider, chipping away at a taboo—for who could argue against the legitimacy of genetic intervention in such circumstances? It is virtually impossible to be opposed, even though the embryo—and all of its descendants—will become the first (partially) genetically programmed humans: human GMOs. The Overton window is shifted, and the next debate may shift it further still, perhaps to allow for genetic modification to boost resistance to fatigue, sharpen vision, or improve memory. How many people will object if the three ideological premises we have been discussing remain widely unknown? At what point exactly do we stray into eugenics?

Another example came out of Project Cyborg, led by the British transhumanist Kevin Warwick, professor of cybernetics at Coventry University. In 1998 and again in 2002, Warwick inserted electrodes into his arm that were directly linked to his nervous system. These were then connected to a computer and, from there, to the internet. With this rig-up he was able to remotely control a robotic arm physically located on the other side of the Atlantic. Conversely, his arm became amenable to remote computer control. In another experiment, he managed to make his own nervous system communicate with that of his wife, also implanted with an electronic chip. At that moment, their two bodies were in synthesis with the internet. This kind of human–machine integration, at the crossroads between neuroscience, medical surgery, digital engineering, and robotics, speaks of a profoundly transhumanist mentality, as Warwick himself acknowledged in 2000: “Those who have become cyborgs will be one step ahead of humans. And just as humans have always valued themselves above other forms of life, it’s likely that cyborgs will look down on humans who have yet to ‘evolve.’”²¹

II – A powerful technological imaginary for the next industrial revolution

Since Warwick’s experiment, the dream of creating posthuman cyborgs has become more explicit and mainstream, calling for creative thinking from politicians and the legal system.²² For example, in 2017, Apple and Cochlear released the Nucleus 7, a sound processor that creates a wireless connection between an iPhone and a chip surgically implanted in the ear. The device allows deaf people to listen to music, make telephone calls, and hear the sound in video content.²³ The Swedish company BioHax and the American firm Three Square Market both already offer employees the option of subcutaneous

microchips, implanted free of charge, that will automatically enter their passwords for company computers, unlock office doors, store personal information, and serve as a method of payment in the staff cafeteria.²⁴ Meanwhile, the work of transhumanist artists such as Neil Harbisson is helping bring the cyborg imaginary into public consciousness.²⁵ Is it conceivable that a future technology allowing a chip to be implanted directly into the brain would be banned, if that technology was used—at least at first—to stimulate the memory of a patient with Alzheimer’s disease?

These two examples demonstrate that transhumanist ideology, often bathed in the glow of a genuinely humanist medical vocation (saving lives, alleviating suffering), strives by whatever means necessary to present new technological artifacts that alter human nature as uncontroversial, inevitable, and, above all, eminently desirable. In this sense, these artifacts are much more than just a new object or procedure; they invariably represent a communion between a technological object or procedure and a sophisticated, targeted discursive technology that presents it as covetable and/or beneficial. These are two sides of the same coin; we never get one without the other. The ultimate goal is always the same: to depoliticize the debate as far as possible, by convincing people that this very specific technology is the perfect solution to some narrow and well-defined problem.

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