Technocracy

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A broad notion of technocracy can be traced back to ancient Greece. The narrow notion of the term is distinctly modern, inspired by the Industrial Revolution and its consequences. The broad notion holds that the caste or class of people who possess superior knowledge of the good and true should rule. The narrow notion holds that those professionals whose knowledge is linked to physical science and technology, notably scientists, engineers, and policy experts, should rule.

The earliest case in which the broad notion of technocracy emerges is Plato’s *Republic* (4th century BCE), which elaborates a caste society in which the Guardians rule by virtue of their mastery of philosophical universals. These Guardians constitute the highest level of human development, above warriors, tradesmen, and slaves.

In the modern, narrower sense of the term, technocracy largely stems from the early twentieth-century work of two American economic and business theorists, Frederick Winslow Taylor and Thorstein Veblen. Taylor invented a system of time and labor management that emphasized the precise measurement of efficiency. “Taylorism” became enormously influential in industry and business schools, although Henry Ford had worked out the essential principles behind it a few years earlier for his “assembly line,” after Ford studied the production process of the Chicago slaughterhouses. Both Taylor and Ford were much admired by the new Russian Bolsheviks. But it was the subsequent economics of Thorstein Veblen that made technocracy an explicit modern ideal. Veblen stressed not just the importance of efficient, scientific management, but rule by engineers rather than “absentee owners” as a program for increasing productivity and reducing poverty and waste. One of Veblen’s most charismatic and passionate disciples, Howard Scott, founded the Technocracy Inc. Movement in the early 1930s as a program for ending the Great Depression. Scott and his followers briefly attracted public attention not only for their technocratic ideas, but also for their Yin-Yang insignia, squads of matching grey cars and uniforms, and cult-like appearance.

During the Second World War, the American political philosopher James Burnham developed his theory of the “managerial revolution” according to which the modern managerial elite would replace capitalist owners with expert rule in superpowers. This development, Burnham held, would soon equal, if not eclipse, existing ideological divisions between democrats, communists and fascists.

In post-war America, the question of technocracy frequently exhibited a pessimistic tone. The social theorists Lewis Mumford and Neil Postman stressed the harmful effects of rampant technology. In Mumford’s view, the problem of the “megamachine” extended back to the building of the pyramids. It had, however, reached its zenith during World War II as the military industrial complex and the scientific establishment finally merged in the Manhattan Project. For Postman, America had become the first “technopoly,” a society radically dominated by technology. Postman saw the dystopian vision of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* as a reflection of this technopoly.

The work of sociologist Daniel Bell developed the idea of a “post-industrial society,” a new social order that emerged by mid-century dominated by professional technocrats with scientific and policy expertise. Though not for Bell a true oligarchy, these experts nonetheless substantially changed the social structure of America by their ethos and influence.

Among post-war European thinkers, three figures stand out: Martin Heidegger, Jacques Ellul and Jürgen Habermas. The late Heidegger warns against a purely instrumental, technological dominance of nature that separates us from the wonder of being. For Ellul, the twentieth century witnessed the on-going acceleration of the “technological society,” in which technics becomes an all-encompassing phenomenon that could not be easily controlled, and religion becomes a hopeful alternative. Working from a neo-Marxian perspective, Habermas has questioned the alliance of capital with technology, and especially their dominance of open communication.

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