



Introduction

This book adopts a critical perspective to help us understand where we are and why we have become what we are. It is not apologetic of our current condition or the powers that dominate us. It is intended to be emancipative in word and spirit. In so doing, it attempts to break free from the overwhelming reductionism that characterizes most intellectual endeavors today.

Emancipation is the fundamental objective of a just society. Human emancipation involves not only freedom from oppressive and exploitive conditions but also participation in the governance of society and its creative activities at all levels. More than at any previous time, emancipative participation involves decisions that define the human condition and what it means to be human through the exercise of creativity in technology. Today, these decisions are overwhelmingly determined by corporatism and its authoritarian power over technology.

Corporatism is defined in this book as the power of business corporations over society. Such power now tends toward hegemony, but as we see later, it is not incontestable. This definition of corporatism varies from the traditional one that signifies collusion between corporate and government interests. Obviously, the traditional definition can be subsumed in the one used here, but the scope of the term is much broader. The term corporatism is therefore used to refer to the

wide-ranging influence of corporate power on society, including its governance, and on nature.

The corporate colonization of our social relations, of our identity as humans, and of life itself is an ongoing enterprise. This “enterprise” is crisis-prone, as it affects all aspects of our existence and of nature on a global scale. It creates crises at many levels that involve the entire context of our existence, including nature and the earth, along with human societies. The words of Richard Levins, a prominent scientist with a rare social sensibility, tell of this unfolding crisis: “It is more profound than previous crises, reaching higher into the atmosphere, deeper into the earth, more widespread in space, and more long lasting, penetrating more corners of our lives.”¹

As it colonizes human society, nature, and the planet, corporatism degrades us, turning our most precious human qualities into commodities. Our creativity, our knowledge, and our learning thus become not qualities that emancipate but commodities that bind us to our alienation from the human condition, from society, and from nature. This degradation of human values is not grounded in technology, in and of itself. *It is grounded in the character of a new kind of corporatism and its authoritarian control over technology.* It is a new kind of corporatism that is more clever, rapacious, and invasive than any previous form and that is imperial in its quest for power and profit as it tries to control any and all aspects of the public domain.

The creation of technology in our time is therefore a decision that has multiple consequences: social, political, economic, and natural, the composite of which may decide the human trajectory. The power of corporatism over these decisions should raise grave concerns about human society. Many of the social pathologies we encounter today are a product of that power, of its demeaning effects on human existence, on our social relations, and on the way we view our place in society. Only an emancipative trajectory that exposes the nature of the new corporatism and charts a new course can contain its pathological effects. And that course must necessarily involve greater accountability for corporatism and a democratization of social decisions on technology. Without them, technology cannot take up an emancipative role, nor can it help create a more just society.

This book exposes the character and pathologies of a new era. By awakening a sense of what the new era represents, its relations of

power, and the challenges it poses, it hopes to raise our social consciousness. Such consciousness is the key to human emancipation in a society where the drive for profit and power overcomes most restraints. Through critical discourse, this book also seeks to promote an awareness of historical possibility without delving into messianic goals or utopian constructs.

This book breaks away from the pervasive reductionism and the narrow, microempiricist approaches that characterize most treatments of social phenomena nowadays. Its broad and often abstract perspectives follow a path taken by numerous authors in radical social criticism and radical political economy. The works of Marx, Braverman, Marcuse, Gramsci, Negri, Gorz, and many other authors enlightened readers by providing broad (and often abstract) vistas that created awareness, enlightened consciousness, and motivated readers to search for and work against the causes of injustice. By providing a broad panorama of an emerging social phenomenon, this book seeks to contribute to radical social criticism in our time and to kindle readers' awareness of injustice and the need for emancipative agendas. There is a place and a need for general perspectives and for broad conceptual constructs in our time to help us size up the ethos of technocapitalism, its contradictions, and its social consequences.

The critical perspective of this book is grounded on the premise that technology is neither completely "neutral" in a purely functional sense, nor is it wholly "cultural" as a sociocultural force unto itself. Technology is a result of human actions and decisions. These decisions have social, political, and economic dimensions, and are therefore not purely technical or indifferent to society. Technology is therefore subject to social intervention, which affects, and is affected by, both functional and cultural influences. It is through this difficult path between functionalism and culturalism that a consideration of the phenomenon of *technocapitalism* must traverse.

Technocapitalism is defined in this book as a new form of capitalism that is heavily grounded on corporate power and its exploitation of technological creativity. Creativity, an intangible human quality, is the most precious resource of this new incarnation of capitalism. Corporate power and profit inevitably depend on the commodification of creativity through research regimes that must generate new inventions and innovations. These regimes and the corporate apparatus in

which they are embedded are to technocapitalism what the factory system and its production regimes were to industrial capitalism. The tangible resources of industrial capitalism, in the form of raw materials, production hardware, capital, and physical labor routines are thus replaced by intangibles, research hardware, experimental designs, and talented individuals with creative aptitudes. The generation of technology in this new era of capitalism is therefore a social phenomenon that relies as much on technical functionality as on the co-optation of cultural attributes.

The definition of technocapitalism used here therefore adopts neither a wholly functionalist nor a fully culturalist perspective.² The former, with its indifference to society and to the social character of technology, with its glorification of technical rationality above any human or social consideration, seems unsuited to any consideration of a socially emancipative role for technology. The dominant influence that corporatism exerts over technological agendas today, in its quest for power and profit, implicitly invalidates the purely functionalist view of technology. The culturalist view, which assumes that technology is a system unto itself from which there is no escape as society is molded and controlled by technological forces, also seems unsuited to any consideration of an emancipative role for technology.³ From the culturalist perspective, attempting social interventions is pointless since there is no way to oppose technological forces, except to retreat to the primitive or the metaphysical.

The critical perspective of this book argues that the values of corporatism are embedded in the research agendas and design of technology.⁴ Technological rationality is therefore not really “neutral” or “functional.” Such rationality is also social, political, economic, and cultural, and it represents the power, the values, and interests of the dominant power: technocapitalist corporatism. The technological rationality of technocapitalism therefore combines technique (the rational character of technology) with social domination (the ideological character of corporatism). Such control is usually codified in the form of rules and conventions that govern how research is done and what it should look for. A critical perspective must therefore consider how these rules and conventions incorporate the values of corporatism, to systematize and justify its pursuit of power.

A critical approach must also analyze the forms of oppression associated with technocapitalism, and the challenges they pose. It must, perforce, consider the role of that new form of corporatism which is dominant in this phenomenon. Since the conquest of nature that technocapitalism and its corporatism represent occurs through social domination, the means to oppose their pathologies are to be found in a democratization of technological decisions. The democratization of these decisions must involve not only the adoption of technology but, most of all, the priorities and research agendas that generate the inventions and innovations in the first place.⁵ Without such democratization, emancipation and justice remain futile notions, and a reconstruction of the sociotechnological platform of society, which is essential to offset the pathologies of technocapitalism, becomes no more than a dream.

The critical approach of this book also assumes that technocapitalism is not an outcome but a process that harbors contradictions and uncertainty. The latter are grounded in social values and in the struggle between corporatism and those who contest its power.⁶ Their consideration distinguishes its approach from the merely “functional” view of technology, and thus recognizes that socially based contradictions and uncertainty are embedded in the research agendas and design of technology. The future trajectory of technocapitalism is therefore subject to change and is suspended between various possible paths. These paths can be created by the dominant, authoritarian power of corporatism *or* by democratic alternatives. Technocapitalism is therefore not necessarily a destiny but a platform of struggle, where the hegemony of corporatism is to be questioned, opposed, and overturned. On that platform of struggle rides the possibility of retracking technocapitalism toward an emancipative trajectory.⁷

All of these views and concerns were part of the motivation for writing this book. They reflect a personal trajectory toward critical thought and analysis, which has been marked by considerable difficulties. Overcoming these difficulties has given a social meaning to this project beyond the intellectual mission of grappling with a phenomenon that seems to have deep repercussions for humanity. Grasping the essence of technocapitalism in a critical way is an elusive enterprise that involves contradictory tendencies, opposition to established practices,

and seeing through the walls erected by those who want to submit us to their influence.

In its scope and contents, this book may be considered controversial. Perhaps this should not surprise, in a time when most of the literature on technology is either supportive or apologetic of corporatism. How-to texts prescribing ways to improve corporate power and profit through technological innovation have little trouble gaining favor. Torrents of such books are published nowadays by university presses and commercial publishers, while critical works are all too often shunned. Critical works are often peremptorily dismissed as “unfit” for “publishing lists” that seem tailored to exclude radical critiques.⁸

The rejection of radical criticism by many publishers is part of a larger phenomenon, however. It would be remiss not to mention the inroads made by reductionism into every area of the social sciences, and its negative impact on critical dissent.⁹ In the current climate, most any effort that is radically critical, broad, multidisciplinary, and that considers the “big picture” of social domination is vulnerable to pejorative comments. Such works are likely to be negatively tagged in favor of narrow or intensely microempiricist projects. Reductionism therefore commands the day and the publishing interest. Academics and publishers with vested interests in perpetuating and profiting from that mode of inquiry are not shy to disdain broadly based critical works, often brazenly and self-righteously.

It seems, therefore, that the review of critical scholarship nowadays all too often involves the opposite of Mertonian norms.¹⁰ Vested interests, prejudice, topic-based biases, coupled with secrecy, are more common than most academics are willing to acknowledge. Subtle prejudice beyond the ideological sort is an additional obstacle faced by those who, being out of the mainstream ethnically or racially, attempt radical criticism. It seems as if some of the strategies and pathologies common to corporatism have made inroads into academia.

This book is the product of many years of research and reflection. The support and constructive feedback provided by many scholars over the years is deeply appreciated and acknowledged. They are too numerous to list here, but all who provided feedback on the topic of this book know about and share my gratitude for their efforts. To my spouse, I owe a special debt of gratitude, not only for her care and support but also for her progressive thoughts and philosophical acumen.

I must thank wholeheartedly the reviewers of the manuscript of this book, for their very critical (but nonetheless constructive) comments. They know, as I do, that no work of social criticism is ever truly complete, and no author can consider himself to be above criticism. I hope that this work contributes to the readers' understanding of our time and its social context. I also hope that they will find strength to oppose the injustices and pathologies that contemporary society imposes on us.