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In the Absence of the Sacred

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Originally I planned to write two books. The first was to be a critique of technological
society as we know it in the United States, a kind of sequel to *Four Arguments for the
Elimination of Television.* Instead of concentrating on TV, though, it would have focused
on the new technological axe: "the information society," computerization, robotization,
space travel, artificial intelligence, genetics, satellite communications. This seemed
timely, since these technologies are changing our world at an astoundingly accelerating
rate. Thus far, most people view these changes as good. But are they?

That our society would tend to view new technologies favorably is understandable. The
first waves of news concerning any technical innovation are invariably positive and
optimistic. That's because, in our society, the information is purveyed by those who stand
to gain from our acceptance of it: corporations and their retainers in the government and
scientific communities. None is motivated to report the negative sides of new
technologies, so the public gets its first insights and expectations from sources that are
clearly biased.

Over time, as successive generations of idealized technical innovations are introduced
and presented at World's Fairs, in futurists' visions, and in hundreds of billions of dollars'
worth of advertising, we develop expectations of a technological utopia here on Earth and
in great domed cities in space. We begin to equate technological evolution with evolution
itself, as though the two were equally inevitable, and virtually identical. The operating
homilies become "Progress is good," "There's no turning back," and "Technology will
free humans from disease, strife, and unremitting toil."

Debate on these subjects is inhibited by the fact that views of technology in our society
are nearly identical across the political and social spectrum. The Left takes the same view
of technology as do corporations, futurists, and the Right. Technology, they all say, is
neutral. It has no inherent politics, no inevitable social or environmental consequences.
What matters, according to this view, is who controls technology.

I have attended dozens of conferences in the last ten years on the future of technology. At
every one, whether sponsored by government, industry, or environmentalists or other
activists, someone will address the assembly with something like this: "There are many
problems with technology and we need to acknowledge them, but the problems are not
rooted to the technologics themselves. They are caused by the way we have chosen to use
them. We can do better. We must do better. Machines don't cause problems, people do."
This is always said as if it were an original and profound idea, when actually everyone
else is saying exactly the same thing.

As we will see, the idea that technology is neutral is itself not neutral - it directly serves the interests of the people who benefit from our inability to see where the juggernaut is headed.

I only began to glimpse the problem during the 1960s when I saw how excited our society became about the presumed potentials of television. Activists, like everyone else, saw the technology opportunistically, and began to vie with other segments of society for their twenty seconds on the network news. A kind of war developed for access to this powerful new instrument that spoke pictures into the brains of the whole population, but the outcome was predetermined. We should have realized it was a foregone conclusion that TV technology would inevitably be controlled by corporations, the government, and the military. Because of the technology's geographic scale, its cost, the astounding power of its imagery, and its ability to homogenize thought, behavior, and culture, large corporations found television uniquely efficient for ingraining a way of life that served (and still serves) their interests. And in times of national crisis, the government and military find TV a perfect instrument for the centralized control of information and consciousness. Meanwhile, all other contenders for control of the medium have effectively fallen by the wayside.

Now we have the frenzy over computers, which, in theory, can empower individuals and small groups and produce a new information democracy. In fact, the issue of who benefits most from computers was already settled when they were invented. Computers, like television, are far more valuable and helpful to the military, to multinational corporations, to international banking, to governments, and to institutions of surveillance and control - all of whom use this technology on a scale and with a speed that are beyond our imaginings - than they ever will be to you and me.

Computers have made it possible to instantaneously move staggering amounts of capital, information, and equipment throughout the world, giving unprecedented power to the largest institutions on the earth. In fact, computers make these institutions possible. Meanwhile, we use our personal computers to edit our copy and hook into our information networks - and believe that makes us more powerful.

Even environmentalists have contributed to the problem by failing to effectively criticize technical evolution despite its obvious, growing, and inherent bias against nature. I fear that the ultimate direction of technology will become vividly clear to us only after we have popped out of the "information age" - which does have a kind of benevolent ring - and realize what is at stake in the last two big "wilderness intervention" battlegrounds: space and the genetic structures of living creatures. From there, it's on to the "postbiological age" of nanotechnology and robotics, whose advocates don't even pretend to care about the natural world. They think it's silly and out of date.

This first book was intended to raise questions about whether techno-logical society has lived up to its advertising, and also to address some grave concerns about its future direction. Until now we have been impotent in the face of the juggernaut, partly because we are so unpracticed in technological criticism. We don't really know how to assess new or existing technologies. It is apparent that we need a new, more holistic language for examining technology, one that would ignore the advertised claims, best-case visions, and glamorous imagery that inundate us and systematically judge technology from alternative perspectives: social, political, economic, spiritual, ecological, biological, military. Who gains? Who loses? Do the new technologies serve planetary destruction or stability? What are their health effects? Psychological effects? How do they affect our interaction with and appreciation of nature? How do they interlock with existing technologies? What do they make possible that could not exist before? What is being lost? Where is it all going? Do we want that? In the end, we can see that technological evolution is leading to something new: a worldwide, interlocked, monolithic, technical-political web of unprecedented negative implications.

The second book was to be a kind of continuation and update of Dee Brown's Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee. That book impressed me tremendously when I read it thirty years ago. In one sense it was a masterful work, detailing in excruciating fashion U.S. double-dealing and brutality against the Indians. But in another sense Brown did the Indian cause a disservice by seeming to suggest that they were all wiped out, and that now there is nothing to be done. The book put the reader through an emotional catharsis; having read it, it was as if one had already paid one's dues. Combined with the popular imagery from television and films, the book helped remand Indian issues to the past.

Even liberal-minded people, concerned about issues of justice, who ac-knowledge the atrocities committed on this land, tend to speak of Indian issues as tragedies of the distant past. So ingrained is this position that when, occasionally, non-Indians do come forward on behalf of present day Indian causes - Marlon Brando, William Kunstler, Robert Redford, Kevin Costner, Jane Fonda - they are all put into that "romantic" category. People are a bit embarrassed for them, as if they'd stepped over some boundary of propriety. When environmentalists such as David Brower occasionally speak publicly about how we should heed the philosophies of the Inuit (Eskimos), they are thought impractical, uncool, not politic, not team players. (And when a specific issue pits native traditions against some current environmental concern, such as fur trapping, or subsistence sealing, or whaling, the native viewpoint is not given a fair hearing.) Literary luminaries like Peter Matthiessen have also been chastised for hooks on contemporary Indian issues (In the Spirit of Crazy Horse and Indian Country, with the implication that they should return to novels and Zen explorations.

I have had my own experiences with this. In Four Arguments I reported several encounters with Indians as a way of revealing bias in the media. I was surprised at the number of critics who cited those lines as foolish. Gene Youngblood, for example, a respected radical writer on media issues, said, "Mander is so naive.... My God, that old sixties chestnut, the Indians."

I thought that even Nelson Mandela got that treatment when he spoke about Indians at his Iggo Oakland rally. The news reports seemed to suggest that he didn't quite understand "our Indians."

The Indian issue is not part of the distant past. Many of the worst anti-Indian campaigns were undertaken scarcely 80 to 100 years ago. Your great-grandparents were already alive at the time. The Model-T Ford was on the road.

More to the point is that the assaults continue today. While the Custer period of direct military action against Indians may be over in the United States, more subtle though equally devastating "legalistic" manipulations continue to separate Indians from their land and their sovereignty, as can be seen from the horrible events in Alaska (described in Chapter 16 of his book. -Ed.).

There are still over one and a half million Indians in the United States today. Significant numbers of them continue to live in wilderness and desert regions and in the far north of Alaska, often engaging in traditional subsistence practices on the same lands where their ancestors lived for millennia. Contrary to popular assumptions, most of these Indians are not eager to become Americans, despite the economic, cultural, and legal pressures to do so.

Elsewhere in the world, millions of native peoples also live in a traditional manner, while suffering varying degrees of impact from the expansion of Western technological society. In places such as Indonesia, Borneo, New Guinea, the Amazon forests, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala, parts of central Africa, the north of Canada, and even Scandinavia, the Soviet Union, China, and Tibet, tribal peoples are struggling to defend their ancestral lands. In other places, such as India, Iraq, Turkey, Mexico, Chile, the Pacific islands,

New Zealand, and Australia, millions more native peoples live a kind of in-between existence, while they are under cultural, economic, or military siege.

According to Cultural Survival, the Boston-based human rights organization, there are at least 3,000 native nations in the world today that continue to function within the boundaries of the 200-odd countries that assert sovereignty over them. Many wars that our media describe as "civil wars" or "guerrilla insurgencies" are actually attempts by tribal nations to free themselves of the domination of larger nation-states. In Guatemala, it's the Mayans. In Burma, it's the Karens. In the Amazon, it's the Yanomamo and the Xingu, among others. In Micronesia, it's the Belauans. In Indonesia, it's the peoples of Irian Jaya.

Perhaps the most painful realization for Americans is that in many of these foreign locales - particularly South America, the Pacific islands, Indonesia, and the Philippines - the natives' struggles to maintain their lands and sovereignty is often directed against United States corporations, or technology, or military. More to the point, It is directed against a mentality, and an approach to the planet and to the human place on Earth, that native people find fatally flawed. For all the centuries they've been in contact with us, they've been saying that our outlook is missing *something*. But we have ignored what they say. To have heeded them would have meant stopping what we were doing and seeking another path. It is this very difference in world views that has made the assault on Indian people inevitable.

While planning to write these two books, however, it became apparent to me that their subjects were inseparable. They belonged together as one book. There is no way to understand the situation of Indians, Eskimos, Aborigines, island peoples, or other native societies without understanding the outside societies that act upon them. And there is no way to understand the outside societies without understanding their relationships to native peoples and to nature itself.

All things considered, it may be the central assumption of technological society that there is virtue in overpowering nature and native peoples. The Indian problem today, as it always has been, is directly related to the needs of technological societies to find and obtain remotely located resources, in order to fuel an incessant and intrinsic demand for growth and technological fulfillment. The process began in our country hundreds of years ago when we wanted land and gold. Today it continues because we want coal, oil, uranium, fish, and more land. As we survey the rest of the world - whether it is the Canadian Arctic, the Borneo jungle, or the Brazilian rainforest - the same interaction is taking place for the same reasons, often involving the same institutions.

All of these acts were and are made possible by one fundamental rationalization: that our society represents the ultimate expression of evolution, its final flowering. It is this attitude, and its corresponding belief that native societies represent an earlier, lower form on the evolutionary ladder, upon which we occupy the highest rung, that seem to unify all modern political perspectives: Right, Left, Capitalist, and Marxist.

Save for such nascent movements as bioregionalism and Green politics, which have at least questioned the assumptions underlying this attitude, most people in Western society are in agreement about our common superiority. So it becomes okay to humiliate - to find insignificant and thus subject to sacrifice - any way of life or way of thinking that stands in the way of a kind of "progress" we have invented, which is scarcely a century old. In fact, having assumed such superiority, it becomes more than acceptable for us to bulldoze nature and native societies. To do so actually becomes desirable, inevitable, and possibly "divine."

But the assertion that technological society is something higher than what came before, and that it is bound to bring us a better world, has lately fallen open to grave doubts. The

Industrial Revolution is about a century old, and we have had ample time to draw a few conclusions about how it is going. It is not too soon to observe that this revolution may not be living up to its advertising, at least in terms of human contentment, fulfillment, health, sanity, and peace. And it is surely creating terrible and possibly catastrophic impacts on the earth. Technotopia seems already to have failed, but meanwhile it continues to lurch forward, expanding its reach and becoming more arrogant and dangerous.

The next questions become: Can we expect the situation to improve or worsen in the future? And what of the people who always told us that this way could not work, and continue to say so now? Finally, which is the more "romantic" viewpoint: that technology will fix itself and lead us to paradise, or that the answer is something simpler?

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