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'Blessed are the breadmakers…': Sociophobia, digital society and the enduring relevance of technological determinism

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Technological determinism, as a position on the nature and effects of technology/ technologies can be divided into optimistic and critical forms. The optimistic variety, of which contemporary cyber-utopianism is an instance, holds that the development of technology shapes or at least facilitates ameliorative alterations in society. The critical variety, on the other hand, tends to problematise or condemn the positive narrative of technological impact on human existence. Whilst the optimistic form still retains some academic credibility, especially concerning digital technologies, the critical variety tends to be viewed as reductionist, essentialist and pessimistic. Furthermore, the fact that many of its leading proponents base their critiques on the analysis of industrial technology, reinforces the impression that critical technological determinism is outdated. I argue that focussing on the specific forms of technology analysed by classic technological determinists is to miss the key point of their arguments. Critical determinism warns that with the increasing integration of technology into everyday life, we run the risk of idealising technological organisation and making sociotechnical relations a model for all social relations. Drawing upon Rendueles's (2017) analysis of the sociophobic tendencies of the online public sphere, I argue for the continuing relevance of so-called 'Classic' technological determinism. The danger posed by the ubiquity of the internet on this account is not that it possesses some innate quality that imposes a particular social pattern on humanity, but that the way in which we interact in cyberspace becomes the norm for social relations outside the cybersphere.

Introduction[1]

This paper explores the ongoing existence and relevance of a largely discredited position in the philosophical analysis of technology, known as technological determinism. Technological determinism is a term used to refer to a particular stance on the nature of technology, adopted in a period of history in the philosophy of technology now referred to as 'classic' philosophy of technology. Technological determinism is no longer viewed as having a credible position in the philosophy of technology. Indeed, to describe a position as a 'technological determinist' one is to flag it as philosophically suspect and not worthy of serious consideration. However, despite technological determinism's low standing in contemporary philosophy of technology, I argue that reports of technological determinism's demise have been greatly exaggerated. Recent years have seen a proliferation of approaches to technological matters that share key features with 'classic' technological determinism. By focusing on a recent text that demonstrates such an approach, I argue for the enduring presence and relevance of technological determinist analyses. I further suggest that the 'new' technological determinism can be developed and enhanced by a critical engagement with the body of theory and methodology found within 'classic' technological determinism.

I shall begin by outlining the 'received view' of what the technological determinist position entails, and will then give a brief overview of the history of technological determinism in the philosophy of technology, from its heyday to its 'demise'. I will then provide an analysis of César Rendueles's (2017) *Sociophobia*, a work that analyses the political dimensions of contemporary digital media and which, I argue, occupies a technological determinist position with regards to the effects of technological existence on human capacities. I will analyse the key features of Rendueles's critique of what he terms 'digital utopianism' and suggest that several theoretical lacunae could be addressed by supplementing his position with concepts drawn from the 'classic' philosopher of technology and (supposed) technological determinist, Jacques Ellul, and that the resulting hybrid model has greater analytic and explanatory potential in the investigation of contemporary digital technology. To this end I will provide a concise account of Ellul's philosophy of technology, and in so doing will argue that the form of technological determinism put forward by 'classic' philosophy of technology bears little resemblance to the received view of 'classic' technological determinism. I will then indicate the utility of the Rendueles-Ellul hybrid by analysing a recent technological phenomenon, that of the online popularisation of bread-making during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is/was technological determinism?

Technological determinism is largely taken to refer to a position in the analysis of technology that was relatively popular in the first half of the 20th century. Whilst considerable variation exists between the positions of those typically identified as technological determinists (e.g. Lewis Mumford, Jacques Ellul, Langdon Winner), 'technological determinists' are supposed to share a common commitment to one or more of the following positions. Firstly, that technology determines the course of social change. This means that society over the course of history goes through a variety of changes and that if one wants to understand what it is that propels that change, then one should look at the development of technology in that historical period. What makes this a technological *determinist* claim is that technology is considered to be the prime determinant of social change. There are degrees of rigour with which one might express this claim. One might allow that religion, culture or politics play some part in driving social change but maintain that technology remains the preeminent social force. A second feature of a technological determinist position is that technology is autonomous. The idea here is that technology has its own internal developmental logic and that, if left to its own devices, there is a certain path that technological development will necessarily take independent of human intention. The second position often accompanies the first, such that technology is held to have its own teleological course of development and that movement along this course is the primary determinant of societal change.

I suspect that this combination of the first and second positions is what people tend to have in mind when they refer to 'technological determinism' (Swer 2014). There are however other variations that are often included under the 'technological determinist' label. One such variation, often associated with the work of Langdon Winner (1977), is that technological development produces unintended social consequences. For instance, a new technology might be intended to produce a certain effect *x*, and may even do so, but once employed that technology also produces social effect *y* that was not intended, and might even run contrary to the intentions of those who designed or commissioned the technology. Insofar as technologies often consist of socio-material structures that may enable or constrain certain forms of social organisation, the unintended consequences of technological development can be said to determine society.

It should be stressed that while the above positions constitute key features of what is taken to be technological determinism, this does not mean that all these features appear in the work of those technological theorists frequently identified as holding technological determinist views. As a classificatory device technological determinism does denote a certain group of thinkers in the history of the philosophy of technology who examined, in a fairly heterodox manner, the ways in which technological development impacted upon or interacted with pre-existing cultural formations. This group is usually taken to include thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Lewis Mumford, Jacques Ellul, Langdon Winner, Thorstein Veblen and, on occasion, Karl Marx. By the 1980s a new

consensus, centred on pragmatism and SCOT (Social Construction of Technology), had formed in the philosophy of technology. The focus now was on processes of knowledge creation in particular social environments, rather than the social effects of technological application. It was the era of the technological micro-study. While SCOT and the pragmatist philosophy of technology have their differences, they are unified in their rejection of 'classic' philosophy of technology, especially technological determinism (Swer and Du Toit, 2020).

However, what is understood by the term 'technological determinist' tends to refer to the received understanding of technological determinism (especially the first and second features), rather than a synoptic understanding of the common features of the group of thinkers labelled technological determinists. Indeed, technological determinism, as Peters (2017) has noted, has achieved the status of a philosophical fallacy. Being self-evidently wrong the position merits no further consideration. Instead the term 'technological determinism' tends to be used as a rhetorical device to flag suspect technological analyses and warn away the unwary reader. It is, in effect, synonymous with being 'pessimistic' or 'essentialist' in matters technological.

And yet whilst technological determinism has been placed beyond the pale and actively forgotten in the philosophy of technology, there has been a resurgence in the use of the term in a non-pejorative sense in the field of Media Studies and with it a renewed focus on issues that, this paper will argue, are typical of 'classic' technological determinism – such as the relationship between human beings and technology, the extent to which technology can exert political influence over society, the effects of long-term use of technological modes of communication and action on societal mores, etc. In the following section I shall explore the analysis of digital media technology put forward by César Rendueles in his *Sociophobia*, and will indicate the ways that it engages with technological concerns typically associated with 'classic' technological determinism.

Rendueles on sociophobia and cyberfetishism

Rendueles holds that in the modern age we have seen the triumph of neo-liberal capitalism and that the major socio-political consequences of its dominance have been the acceleration of the erosion and destruction of society's last communitarian bonds. Rendueles characterises the social impact of modernity as a progressive reduction of the communitarian bonds that once typified Western society accompanied by the construction of a society that materially creates the liberal individualist economic notion of human existence. One of the key concepts that Rendueles introduces in his analysis is the idea of sociophobia. Rendueles traces a strand in Enlightenment thought that advocates liberalism not on the basis of a view of human rationality or a belief about the inalienability of certain individual freedoms but on purely economic grounds. Such thinkers, and here Rendueles identifies Montesquieu, take an essentially pessimistic view of human nature and the human capacity for harmonious co-habitation with their fellows. They argue that it is only through the extension of the rules of conduct that accompany the capitalist economic system that one can motivate individuals to comport themselves in a vaguely civilised manner. Other humans are, as a rule, to be feared or at the very least distrusted and it is only through the free operation of a capitalist economic system that one can, by appeal to economic self-interest, persuade the majority to curtail and govern their less desirable behaviours. Societal functioning, according to this model, is contingent upon the operations of the market, for without economic modes of interrelation human beings would relapse into baser forms of behaviour.

An understanding of this attitude, Rendueles suggests, is not merely a matter of historical interest. He argues that sociophobia, the profound suspicion of any social commitment that might hinder the individual quest for satisfaction, persists in contemporary online society. Indeed, for Rendueles this sociophobic view of humanity is the invisible assumption that underpins much of the neoliberal economic order and particularly the forms of behaviour that manifest in the digital public sphere. The Internet serves as an apparatus for perpetual consumption, a "virtual shopping centre…" as Simanowski puts it, in which everything is available to everyone at all times (2017, ix). Rendueles argues that the use of the Internet, and indeed our entire online existence, instantiates a mode of being that expresses and reinforces societal sociophobia. Contemporary society is one characterised by consumerism and commodification. The new digital media provide the means on which we rely

increasingly for both work and leisure and, Rendueles claims, the use of this digital technology reinforces the sociophobia that he sees as being at the roots of neoliberal capitalism. He depicts a mutually reinforcing pattern whereby we practice sociophobia economically and allow economics to restructure our social behaviours, and then move online into a virtual, supposedly post- or super-material space, which nonetheless reinforces the sociophobic sentiment and behaviour that we practice in offline existence.

Rendueles's claim that the Internet serves to reinforce a neoliberal conception of human social relations has been made by a number of other commentators. What is novel about Rendueles's analysis is his argument that as the Internet reinforces neoliberal attitudes and modes of human interaction in the material world, with attendant consequences in the material world of social inequality and environmental devastation, it presents itself as a solution to the political crises that it facilitates. This is the counterpart concept to sociophobia which Rendueles terms cyberfetishism. Rendueles does not suggest that the radical social inequalities that accompany modernity are caused by the Internet. Rather that these inequalities have been greatly exacerbated by the spread of neoliberal capitalism. Such inequalities, Rendueles maintains, require a political solution and yet one of the effects of the proliferation of neoliberal attitudes and forms of behaviour in society has been the progressive erosion of communal ties and sensibilities.

The implications of this erosion are twofold. Firstly, and contrary to the sociophobic assumptions of neoliberal capitalism, a functioning economic order is dependent upon the existence of non-economic social bonds, particularly bonds of care between vulnerable members of society. In destroying these bonds, the present economic system undermines its own foundations. Secondly, Rendueles asserts, the erosion of social bonds and spread of sociophobic behaviour have diminished both popular belief in the capacity of politics to effect meaningful material change, and the social conditions conducive to the formation of political movements that could affect such change. Traditional politics is portrayed as outmoded and ineffective, and sociophobia hinders the organisation of effective political movements. It is here, Rendueles claims, that the Internet inserts itself into the political void by offering itself as a site and model for "liberating social transformation". In a world in which politics is discredited, activism ineffectual, and in which relations with social others are understood minimally as a means to fulfil individual wants, the Internet appears as both a symbol and a means for a new way of doing politics, a doorway to a post-capitalist political utopia in which politics is conducted with large-scale efficiency, in which everyone's preferences are accounted for, in which social interactions with others are frictionless and instantaneous, in which everyone is equal and all are equally free to express their opinions.

The Internet, presented in this light, appears as an idealised Habermasian public sphere in which through discourse the most appropriate and rational response to a political issue can appear. Rendueles remarks that if one truly views the Internet as representing the public sphere then one is obliged to accept that the two interests preoccupying the minds of the average citizen are cat videos and amateur pornography (Rendueles 2017, 38). Rendueles suggests that the model of social interaction which the Internet represents and reinforces is that of the 24-hour shopping mall. Whilst political activism may take place in the digital sphere, it does so by conforming itself to the structures of consumerist transactions. A system designed for the ease of self-gratification does not lend itself well to activities that require collective reflection and continuous commitment. The Internet for Rendueles represents a public sphere, not in the Habermasian sense, but founded upon the transmission of information along commercial channels. It exacerbates the process of commoditisation whereby all goods and services are homogenised, leading to the further erosion of personality and social ties.

Whilst Rendueles does not dispute the claim that the Internet is a great leveller, in that all are equal in the digital sphere, it is for him a levelling of the most pernicious sort. For all aspects of human existence are put forward as goods of equivalent value with which one engages in much the same manner as one engages with standard commercial goods, in which the dominant concern is the rational satisfaction of personal preferences. A political institution founded upon the model of the Internet would be oblivious to the fact that not all human activities are of equal value, for example

that the need for material equality is more than a personal preference, and that the neutral weighting of all individual preferences ignores the necessary priority of needs over wants.

And yet it is presented as a site for the formation of new, better social bonds between autonomous individuals with no relation other than their shared interest. Needless to say, this cyber-utopia of frictionless and efficient politics is utterly dependent on technology. And yet rather than being a drawback, this displacement of the political from the messy material world to the polished order of the virtual supermarket is viewed as an advantage. This, for Rendueles, is the key to cyberfetishism, the fact that the technological is viewed as superior to the organic and therefore preferable. The solution to the crisis of the material is to 'sublime', to transcend to the virtual.[2] And so the solution to the issues of material inequality and environmental devastation caused in large part by the sociophobia of neoliberal capitalism is to move politics into the realm of pure sociophobia, where the fictional egalitarianism of the virtual enables us to ignore material inequality and the soliciting of preferences allows the illusion of consultation without the inconvenience of engaging with others.

This is the essence of Rendueles's technological critique, that digital media promotes sociophobia, which exacerbates social inequality and erodes the possibility of effective political responses to that inequality. And that the cyberfetishism, which extols the Internet as a model for the production of political solutions, in fact acts as a means to shield the reality and causes of material inequality from popular consideration. Its putative solution to the failure of politics is to substitute a virtual discourse which serves to reinforce the sociophobia that lies at the heart of material inequality and the ineffectiveness of traditional politics.

At this point Rendueles makes a rather unusual move and lays the blame for the current state of affairs, to a large degree, at the feet of the social sciences. Rendueles's move here is reminiscent of Horkheimer's critique of sociology (2002). Horkheimer argued that traditional sociology, rather than critique society and seek to change it, simply describes it. And by so doing it effectively normalises the status quo and has a reactionary political effect. On Rendueles's account the rise of neoliberal capitalism and the Internet went hand in hand with the increasing importance of the social sciences. Rendueles argues that the social sciences operate at a level of considerable abstraction, positing increasingly refined models that carve and re-carve the polity into a multitude of groups and subgroups. The ostensible purpose of this proliferation of social abstractions is to provide a more exact grasp of the pertinent details of social reality. But, Rendueles suggests, the actual effect of these abstractions is to arbitrarily divide that which in actuality formed a series of cohesive social wholes. The abstractions thus produced are then used to determine and justify the provision of goods and services in society, and are refined and applied even further in the digital sphere in modelling user preferences.

Rendueles is a little hazy on the details of how all the above connects to his accounts of sociophobia and cyberfetishism. However, he does indicate that there is a connection between the convergence of consumerism and digital technology, and the rise of the social sciences, and that these factors are ultimately responsible for the erosion of meaningful political activity and non-commercial social commitments. For Rendueles, the basis of society rests upon social bonds rather than economic transactions and these social bonds are not entirely elective in that their existence is necessitated by our anthropological nature as finite, fragile beings. Humans, for all that they may like to think of themselves as self-sufficient individuals, are in fact fundamentally co-dependent creatures that rely upon one another for care. For Rendueles the very possibility of emancipatory politics is contingent upon the continued existence of these basic social bonds of care. And yet, with the propagation of neoliberal capitalism and the concomitant spread of sociophobia, and the increasing acceptance of the cyberfetishist credo that a better form of politics is to be found on the Internet, the erosion of the last social bonds is being accelerated. And with them, go the last possibilities for emancipatory political activism.

Whilst this paper does not wish to dispute Rendueles's claim *that* the rise of digital media has facilitated the spread of sociophobia, or eroded the social basis for meaningful political activity, his account lacks explanatory detail on *why* it is that increasing use of digital media technology should

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2   I have borrowed this term from Ian M. Banks's Culture novels.

have these political outcomes. Why, for instance, is it the case that people would view digitally-mediated consensus politics as preferable to grassroots activism? One might appeal to sociophobia or cyberfetishism to explain this, but then one risks using the phenomenon that one wishes to explain as an explanation itself. *Sociophobia* is a negative account of society, in which human beings appear as either means or obstacles to the pursuit of individual satisfaction, and in which fear of irrational non-economic behaviour reinforces commitment to purely transactional modes of social interaction. Cyberfetishism, on the other hand is a positive model, a form of utopianism. It is by no means obvious, from Rendueles's account, how one derives a positive value from a negative sentiment, nor does he suggest that the enthusiasm for cyberfetishist political solutions is feigned or merely rhetorical. Nor does he explain why it should be supposed that the use of digital media for political purposes will inevitably have sociophobic effects.

In this instance I shall draw upon the work of Jacques Ellul and his concept of la technique. I use Ellul in part because his work aligns in many ways with that of Rendueles and can provide some of the explanatory detail that his account lacks, and in part because Ellul represents a leading member of the unacceptable technological determinist movement that contemporary philosophy of technology has consigned to the dustbin of history. By using Ellul to support Rendueles's analysis of digital politics I hope to suggest to the reader firstly, the enduring utility of 'classic' technological determinism and secondly, that the received view of what technological determinism entails bears little resemblance to the actual views of the technological determinists themselves.

Ellul and *la technique*

Ellul's philosophy of technology focuses on the effects of technological development on the human spirit and the capacity for freedom. Ellul attaches primary social significance to a 'technical phenomenon' of which both abstract and material technology are but an effect. The technical phenomenon, or 'technique', may be characterised as "any complex of standardised means for attaining a predetermined result" which has absolute efficiency as its priority (Ellul 1964, vi). Historically, Ellul's technique very much resembles Mumford's biotechnics. When one employed a certain method to pick fruit or hunt a certain animal, one used technique. That is to say one employed a particular method to achieve a particular end (Ellul 1964, 21). However work of this sort was but one dimension of the many others, such as play, conversation, religious ceremony, which made up the entirety of social life. Given the static tendencies of the pre-modern magical worldview in which technique and artifactual technology were components, and the comparative lack of importance attached to work as opposed to other social activities, the evolution of technique was minimal. It had no 'reality in itself' and was but an intermediary between humanity and its natural surrounds.

However, over the passage of time, the character of technique changed. As reason was applied to the question of technique, it became apparent that there were other, alternative means of operating which would be more efficacious. From the multitude of potential means, reason selects those that are likely to be most efficient. It is with this development of concern about the efficiency of method that technique, in its modern form, makes its appearance. The demonstrability of a technique's superior efficiency is in itself grounds for its adoption. And in the consequent efforts to identify the 'one best way' to accomplish any given operation, the means of an operation become more socially important than its ends. This technological rationality values efficiency over all else and as a value system, rather than a physical entity, technique is transferable to most regions of human activity, politics, economics and sport. Its evident effectiveness both compels its adoption and its continuance as humanity continues to search for perfect efficiency (Ellul 1964, 19–21).

According to Ellul, the adoption of the values of technological rationality has a deleterious effect on human society and represents a major obstacle to the construction of a sustainable, equitable and fully human society. Rejecting the view which locates the source of technique's power and perpetuation in the self-interest of the ruling classes, Ellul argues instead that it is technique that is the source of the ruling classes themselves. The development of technique enabled the rise of science, by advocating its applicability and utility. It also enabled the rise of the bourgeoisie, who, recognising that technique made them money, made the development of technique their

objective (Ellul 1964, 53). According to Ellul, it was technique which made the bourgeoisie wealthy and powerful, and it was the bourgeoisie who bankrolled the development of technique. And a prerequisite of both these developments was that the majority of the populace, namely the peasantry and the workers, be treated as exploitable resources. For, on Ellul's account, the technological system cannot be instantiated and expanded unless the collection of entities on which it operates has been reduced to a state of passivity. Thus, says Ellul in a manner reminiscent of Heidegger, "man himself is overpowered by technique and becomes its object" (Ellul 1964, 127).

This position would appear to support the view that the capitalist class uses science and technology to exploit the majority to their benefit. However, for Ellul, science and technology are but instances of technique, theoretical and material examples of the pursuit of efficiency in knowledge and in industry. In so far as science and technology embody values, they are those of technique, rather than those of the ruling classes. Though it may appear that the capitalist class uses technique to its own advantage, it is in fact the case that technique makes use of them. As Winner observes:

> The privileged position of an elite or ruling class is not proof that it steers the mechanism but only that it has a comfortable seat for the ride (Winner 1977, 41).

To attain their elevated position, the bourgeoisie had to obey the dictates of technique. To maintain their position, they must continue to do so. Indeed, so unidirectional is the trajectory of technical development that even if a revolution of the proletariat were to occur, all that would happen would be a change of ruling class, rather than a reduction in the continuing encroachment of technical rationality into all aspects of society. Those who rule are no freer than those who are ruled. They can still only decide in favour of the particular technique that brings greatest efficiency. Ruling, in the technological society, is a matter of evaluation of efficiency, not choice. Insofar as they allow themselves to be oriented by technological values, Ellul argues, humans become no more than automata, passive in the face of technical development, simply adapting to change (Ellul 1964, 80).

The above position might seem rather similar to the received view of technological determinism, with ideas of the inexorable march of technology, driven by technology's inner logic, moulding a helpless humanity as it goes. However, when assessing the extent to which Ellul views humanity as passive and helpless before the development and expansion of the technical system, it is essential that one appreciate just how deterministic a position he is defending. From the discussion of Ellul's work above, one might well conclude that he is advancing a very 'hard' variety of technological determinism coupled with the notion of autonomous technology. Statements such as, "technique elicits and conditions social, political and economic change. It is the prime mover," appear to leave little room for ambiguity on these matters (Ellul 1964, 133). However, Ellul's system is more complex than a vulgar determinist reading of his work will allow. The main point of his work is to demonstrate to humanity the extent to which it has abdicated its freedom to the rationality of the technique. As Gertz notes,

> Ellul is neither an anti-technology extremist warning us against some sort of eventual robot uprising or a Luddite who ascribed technology to supernatural powers. Rather, by focusing on the concept of 'technique', Ellul aims to show us how the methods and aims of technology are increasingly becoming the methods and aims of humanity. (Gertz 2015, 56).

In that Ellul suggests that humanity might regain this freedom, and that he suggests ways in which they might do so, his cannot be a truly determinist account, as in Bruce Bimber's nomological sense of the term (Bimber 1994, 84). Human freedom, for Ellul, is not a static but a dynamic concept, a prize continuously to be won. Humanity is indeed determined, but it is open to it to overcome necessity, and it is in this act that freedom is found (Ellul 1964, xxix). The technique progressively erodes human spirituality and values as they represent obstacles to the pursuit of perfect efficiency. It is humanity's challenge to reject the values of the technical ensemble and to set its own limits on technically motivated actions. To overcome the determinism of technique and to impose human constraints on it lies at the heart of the possibility of human freedom in the technological society, and to actualise this possibility we must develop an ethic of non-power: "that humans agree not to do everything they are able to" (Ellul 1989, 31) Humanity is only technically determined as long as

it allows itself to be.

And it is this dependence upon the compliance of humanity that undermines the charge that Ellul's technique is in some way autonomous. To say that technique 'extends itself' or 'eliminates moral judgements' is not to suggest that technique is some type of entity with its own, non-human ends. Technique never had, nor ever could have, its own ends. It is "a means for a set of rules for the game", and no more (Ellul 1964, 97). To say that these rules develop is not to attribute to them any form of direction. It is humanity which, by accepting the technical rationality, extends and develops the technical domain. And as the dynamic of technique carries it along in its search for total organisational efficiency, humanity allows its essential qualities to be eliminated from the sociotechnical sphere. In this tacit way, "man is reduced to the level of catalyst... he starts the operation (of technique) without participating in it" (Ellul 1964, 135). Humanity comes to be the medium through which technique perpetuates itself. Winner characterises Ellul's position as 'technological Darwinism'. Technique is held to represent the technical gene pool and humanity the selective environment. Humanity, as the 'carrier' of technique, enables the structures of the technical ensemble to 'mutate', adapting to a particular social niche (Winner 1977, 57–8). Thus, while technique remains the 'prime mover', it is essentially dependent on humanity for its perpetuation. Therefore, it is neither an absolute determinant, nor is it truly autonomous. Consequently, while Ellul's position on the nature of technology might with some justification be deemed to be non-voluntarist, it is not a determinist position.

Efficient sociophobia

The major affinity between the work of Ellul and that of Rendueles is that both their works focus upon the relationship between values and the increasing technological mediation of existence. Ellul's work analyses the values that are engendered in society by working and living in technological systems. And Rendueles's work can be viewed as exploring the political dimensions of the same phenomenon. In analysing what he terms sociophobia, Rendueles traces the spread of a social sentiment under neoliberal capitalism that appears to negate the possibility of alternative, more traditional forms of politics. And in analysing cyberfetishism, he examines the rise of a new model for political activity and the reasons for its popularity. In both cases, though Rendueles doesn't put it in these Ellulian terms, the issue concerns values. On Rendueles's account, sociophobia is the social sentiment that arises when traditional forms of value are displaced, and the increasing technologisation of existence increases this sentiment. In this social environment technology and technological modes of activity and organisation alone retain popular social value. Consequently, a technological solution to contemporary political problems seems the preferable option. Missing from Rendueles's narrative is an explanation of how the rise of digital technology has driven the expansion of the sociophobia at the core of neoliberal society, and why it should be the case that the same technology cannot be the basis for emancipatory political activity.

Ellul's analysis of technique can be used to plug these explanatory gaps in a manner that supports Rendueles's overall position. Ellul's concept of technological rationality can provide the link between the sociophobic erosion of communal values, and the rise of cyberfetishist values as an alternative. Central to Ellul's position is the argument that efficiency, in addition to being a method of operational assessment, also functions as a value system. Technique's expansion thus has a twofold effect: As it displaces pre-existing value systems it also presents itself (and the technological systems with which it is associated) as ends in themselves. The former effect provides enabling conditions for sociophobia, and the latter for the attribution of near-utopian characteristics to the prospect of technological politics.

On Ellul's account the rise of modern technological society led to an increasing familiarity with efficiency criteria with regard to the assessment of technological performance. With the increasing technologisation of society, efficiency passed from being a means of adjudicating between different modes of operation to being a value in and of itself. It moved beyond being a way to evaluate possible means, and became an end in itself. Efficiency as value spread beyond the workplace into all areas of social existence, hastened by the technologisation of leisure. It also proved to be

extremely amenable to a market-oriented economic system that construed efficiency as the removal of all restrictions on the free market. Efficiency as a value in a capitalist system leads to a view of society that equates freedom with the unhindered operation of market principles, which in turn fosters sociophobic fears of forms of social activity or organisation that seek to curb or regulate the market. Social relations that do no exhibit or which hinder the operations of these principles are inefficient, and inefficiency threatens the social contract that keeps the hostile other bridled.

In a society where digital technology usage is increasingly prevalent, the perpetuation of efficiency values is likely to continue. And this in turn is likely to displace or erode pre-existing social norms that cannot justify themselves in terms of efficiency.[3] Technological values, as they spread through a society, undermine the possibility for alternative values based on co-dependency and an ethos of care to form. Things like consensus-forming at a community level, and long-term commitments to shared social objectives, which Rendueles views as central to emancipatory politics, are unlikely to flourish in such a value system – particularly if a putatively more efficient technological alternative to such political activities can be found. And this in turn brings us to Rendueles's analysis of cyberfetishism.

The market, in the neoliberal model, functions as the ultimate information processing machine, a "transcendental superior information processor", as Philip Mirowski puts it (Mirowski 2014, 39). The more efficiently the machine functions, and the more efficiently we respond to its signals, the more perfectly it will be able to meet our consumerist urges. Given this understanding of the market and its relation to society, it is understandable that the Internet would appear as a desirable model and site for social and political activity. It represents consumerist technique in its most perfect form. And faith in its superiority, as Ellul and Rendueles observe, takes on almost religious dimensions. For Ellul, Germain points out, this religious dimension can be observed in the respect unconditionally accorded to technique. He states that,

> We respect it for its proven success in providing the means to a commodious existence. We respect it for its promise of even greater freedom from restraint in the future. We even respect technique when the power it unleashes turns back on us, citing our mismanagement of this power as the true source of the problem (Germain 1994, 257).

In addition to freedom, in the form of immaterial equality for all, the Internet promises a form of interaction conducted by the most efficient means. For those committed to technological values, it is political utopia, far removed from the inefficiency of the material world. And this in turn indicates why Rendueles insists that the Internet could never provide a mode of alternative politics. The technologisation of social existence propagates efficiency as a value, which in turn promotes sociophobia and erodes non-technological values. And if this is the case, then even if one were to use the Internet to promote an alternative form of politics, the very centrality of the use of this technology would continue the propagation of technological values, which in turn would problematise any attempt to develop non-sociophobic social values. The solution to material inequalities caused by the operation of technique would be envisioned in terms of new and improved applications of technique.

Though the combination of Ellul's account of the social effects of technique with Rendueles's concepts of sociophobia and cyberfetishism assists in clarifying the ways in which technological usage leads to the erosion of social commitments, it also problematises Rendueles's solution to sociophobia by rendering more difficult the formation of new social values and political commitments through renewed social activism amongst communities.[4] Despite the obstacles to

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3 Ellul notes that, "What prevents technique from operating better is the whole stock of ideologies, feelings, principles, beliefs, etc. that people continue to carry around and which are derived from traditional situations. It is necessary (and this is the ethical choice!) to liquidate all such holdovers, and to lead humanity to a perfect operational adaptation that will bring about the greatest possible benefit from the technique. Adaptation becomes a moral criterion" (Ellul 1989, 27).

4 Rendueles calls for political activism based upon concrete social commitments, upon bonds of care and material needs within a specific place and space, as opposed to the consensus of preferences expressed by a digital citizenry. And whilst Rendueles does make a case for this contextual and contingent mode of practical politics, he doesn't really explain how this is supposed to come about. This is not meant to echo the age-old criticism of political radicals that they won't show us the blueprints for the post-revolutionary utopia. Indeed, it is central

Rendueles's solution, I suggest that the model he puts forward of sociophobia and cyberfetishism, when reinforced by Ellul, do offer us an interesting means of analysing certain aspects of online existence. It offers us a means of exploring the political effects of technique under contemporary neoliberal capitalism, and the ways in which technological values fuse with consumerist ideologies. As an example of its utility, I have chosen to look at the recent Internet phenomenon of pandemic breadmaking.

Borgmann and pandemic breadmaking
The period of economic and social disruption brought about the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ensuing lockdown measures implemented across the globe, have resulted in a vast upsurge of Internet usage. Faced with the uncertainty of the pandemic, people have turned to the Internet to communicate with distant friends and relatives, to seek medical advice, to order food deliveries, to work from home, and for leisure purposes. While a large proportion of the world's population of course has little or no access to digital media, the minority who do have significantly increased the time they spend online. And this presents a unique opportunity to analyse the effects of digital existence upon the connected minority. Langdon Winner once suggested that if we really wanted to understand all the ways that a certain technology affects our existence, the solution is to turn it off for a while. Only then can we truly appreciate the various ways in which that technology constrains or enables our activities. The pandemic represents an inversion of Winner's epistemological Luddism. For rather than turning off the technology, you turn it up instead whilst simultaneously removing 'complicating factors' that might normally disrupt one's Internet usage, such as trips to the supermarket, a commute to work, socialising, etc. From a Renduelesian perspective one gets to witness the effects upon the digital citizen of existing full-time in the rarefied air of cyber utopia. If, as Rendueles maintains, sociophobia is a consequence of online interaction it follows that we would have observed its online manifestation in a more marked manner during the pandemic.

   To this end, this paper has chosen to focus on the recent flurry of online interest in breadmaking. While the history of breadmaking began long before the start of the pandemic, and while most would agree that bread is a fairly important feature of everyday existence, breadmaking is not an activity in which one is usually exhorted to participate. And yet all this has changed since the advent of COVID-19. Stores across the world experienced flour shortages as a result of the surge in demand for breadmaking ingredients, and the Twittersphere filled with censorial declamations of pandemic flour hoarders. As Mull notes, "Never had emotions run so high about milled wheat" (Mull 2020). Pandemic breadmaking offers an opportunity to apply the Rendueles-Ellul hybrid that can demonstrate its analytic potential. Also, breadmaking provides an example of pandemic activity that, on the face of it, should disprove Rendueles's argument. There is a parallel universe somewhere not so different from our own where, instead of using pandemic breadmaking to support the argument that Internet useage propagates technological values and sociophobia, I used it instead to argue for pandemic breadmaking as a clear instance of people's yearning for a non-technological mode of being. The reason for this is that bread and breadmaking call to mind Albert Borgmann's concepts of 'focal things' and 'focal practices'.

   A 'focal thing' is something that stands outside the empty technological patterns of contemporary existence and invites us to connect with it, and the various relations in which it stands. It brings into focus the thing as it is and illuminates the way it engages us and the broader significance of the role it plays in our life. A 'focal practice' is a pattern of engagement with a focal thing that cultivates our capacity to engage with things in a manner that looks beyond a thing's utility-potential and cherishes it as the thing that it is in itself. For Borgmann, focal practices hold the means to engage with the world in all its depth, to step outside the sphere of productivity and performance and reconnect with the things and relationships that give our lives meaning.

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to Rendueles' notion of material politics that no such blueprint could ever be given, insofar as each community would develop their own mode of political activity and their own political programme based upon their own resources, needs, challenges and shared axiological commitments. Rather my question concerns the possibilities for actualising Rendueles's preferred form of political engagement given that, on his account, the digital citizenry is portrayed as essentially passive consumers.

On the face of it, pandemic breadmaking certainly seems to fit the Borgmannian criteria for a focal practice. Bread looks like a likely candidate for a focal thing. One can imagine reflecting on the materiality of the bread, its texture and aroma, the way it embodies our relationship with the grain and the earth, etc. And breadmaking seems like a Borgmannian focal practice *par excellence*. The features of the focal thing are present in the practice, and the practice itself cherishes these features and creates a recurrent space for the bread to *be* a focal thing. Also, the practice of breadmaking throws further meaningful relations into relief, such as the breadmaker's commitment of time and effort to the task, the care taken in preparing the dough, the affection expressed in making the bread for others, the communal bonds shared and renewed in gathering to eat the freshly-baked bread, etc. Viewed in this way, the Internet breadmaking phenomenon appears as something that the technological determinist should celebrate, an instance where people who have grown weary of the gleaming sterility of online existence use that same technology to organise activities offline that have the potential to restore meaning to non-technological existence; a time when, as Borgmann puts it,

> the technological environment heightens rather than denies the radiance of genuine focal things and when we learn to understand that focal things require a practice to prosper within (Borgmann 1984, 196).

Whilst it certainly may be the case that for some of its proponents at least pandemic breadmaking does serve this restorative function, pandemic breadmaking can appear quite differently when viewed through a Renduelesian-Ellulian lens. Pandemic breadmaking, for all its Borgmannian ethos, is a digital phenomenon, existing in videos shared online, and posts and commentaries on Facebook, Twitter, etc.

On one level one can group the breadmaking fad with other instances of what has been termed 'productivity porn', part of the trend for pandemic self-improvement. For every post about sourdough starters, there is another encouraging you to learn a foreign language or take an online degree course. Whilst much of this might simply be a matter of people sharing tips on how to spend the extra time they suddenly find themselves with under lockdown, there is something curiously performative about this trend. It is not enough that one makes bread, or that one enjoys sharing it with one's family. The bread you make must be recorded and displayed, as must your family's enjoyment of the bread, on Facebook. This sort of thing has become so ubiquitous recently that it is easy to forget how peculiar it is. Lots of people make food for their families, lots of families enjoy eating the food and yet no one feels compelled to record the food, or their family's enjoyment of the food, for posterity. Neither do they feel obliged to share the record with the wider world. Until now, that is.

If one imagines a group of people living existences in which the dominant value system is one of efficiency, construed in neoliberal capitalist terms, then one can quite easily imagine that for such people the inefficient life would be viewed as one without value, and thus not worth living. The enforced passivity inflicted on many by lockdown measures then produces something of an existential crisis for *homo technologicus*. A meaningful existence is one in which one is productively efficient. Efficient production not only validates the individual, it also maintains the neoliberal system on which civilisation depends. To be inefficient not only invalidates the individual. It also threatens the security of the system, the web of transactional social relations that safeguard against humanity's inherent disorder. To the sociophobe, efficiency preserves order, and inefficiency promotes disorder. And yet, the efficient digital citizen has been instructed to comply with lockdown regulations, that is to be inefficient, in order to preserve the system. This poses something of a conundrum and the solution, for many, appears to have been the pursuit of alternative forms of efficiency. The profane hours lost from work are reenchanted by the pursuit of efficiency in, for instance, breadmaking.

Performative breadmaking then, from a Renduelian perspective, appears not as a focal practice in the Borgmannian sense but as the maintenance of technological values in the absence of the world of work. Making optimal use of non-working hours now becomes an existential imperative, and breadmaking serves as a substitute productive activity. The focal practice, instead of serving as an

antidote to technological modes of existence, a way of stepping outside of them and reconnecting with that which is fundamental to human existence, instead becomes a digital performance. It is an activity performed in the material world in order to reaffirm technological values. The digital citizen finds alternative means to demonstrate their efficiency and further validates their existence by performing it in the digital sphere. The focal practice becomes a performance of efficiency which becomes a product to be consumed in the online marketplace. Breadmaking serves particularly well as a means of efficiency-signalling because, unlike reading a book or listening to music, it allows for evaluative assessment. A series of bread products can be posted to demonstrate progressive improvement over time alongside narratives of reduced time spent in the breadmaking process and improvements in the quantity and quality of the output. Breadmaking also offers a variety of different techniques that can be employed in pursuit of the optimal bread product, thereby providing many opportunities for debate over the comparative efficiency of competing techniques.

There are other ways in which pandemic breadmaking demonstrates sociophobic features. The focus on making one's own bread occurred during a global pandemic and under lockdown conditions. A concern with hygiene and self-sufficiency, such as would motivate one to make their own bread, would have seemed perfectly reasonable under the circumstances. And yet, it is not hard to see recurrent sociophobic themes in the *digital* phenomenon of performative breadmaking. One of the effects of the pandemic has been to bring to public awareness the level of dependence that modern societies have upon what is euphemistically termed 'unskilled' labour: the shelf-stackers, the freight-haulers, the cashiers. The sudden resolve to make one's own bread can be viewed as an assertion of libertarian independence in the face of mounting evidence of societal co-dependence. The relationship between breadmaking and hygiene during a pandemic is a little more complicated. The danger of contact with invisible disease outside the home might well have made one understandably concerned about the cleanliness of the food coming into the home. One feature of pandemic shopping was the near ritualistic wiping down of purchased goods with sanitiser. Making one's own bread represented one way of ensuring that at least part of one's food was free from external contamination. And yet this justifiable concern with disease also overlaps with the sociophobic fear of 'the other'. The Internet was flooded with frightening reports which linked the spread of the coronavirus to groups perceived as 'unproductive', such as foreigners, the poor, the unemployed. Epidemiology converged with sociophobia, and performative breadmaking in the cybersphere symbolises moral and biological purity. The breadmakers still have value. It is the non-breadmaking other that is to be feared. And this in turn suggests another reason for the stridency of tone evident in the online exhortations to exist efficiently. For if one is not engaged productively in activities that maintain the technological value system and the neoliberal social model, then what is one doing with one's time? Non-productive existence spreads the sickness that erodes society. The devil makes work for idle hands and so it is best to keep them occupied with kneading. For the virtuously efficient, the Internet provided a sterile refuge from the pandemic, where one could transact with the other but without having to touch them.

This analysis of pandemic breadmaking is meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, and is intended to indicate the possibilities offered by a technological determinist perspective. Likewise, the treatment of both Rendueles and Ellul given in this paper is far from comprehensive, and their work contains much that is of relevance to the analysis of technological society that has not been touched upon here. More modestly this paper aims to demonstrate the explanatory potential present in Rendueles's recent work and the unrealised potential in Ellul's philosophy of technology, and by extension that of other 'classic' technological determinists too.

Conclusion

I have argued here for the ongoing relevance of technological determinism to contemporary analyses of technological phenomena. 'Classic' technological determinism offers a range of analytic tools and clarificatory concepts that can serve as a 'tool box' for the contemporary theorist of technology. I do not wish to suggest 'classic' philosophy of technology, or more specifically 'classic' technological determinism, got technology right and that every instance
of valuable technological critique since is essentially old wine in new bottles. Rather I suggest that

a re-engagement with the work of 'classic' technological determinists can add analytic dimensions to contemporary technological analysis that strengthens the latter. The analysis of Rendueles's critique of sociophobia and cyberfetishism was intended to indicate the relevance of technological determinist critique to digital technology. And by using elements of Ellul's philosophy to support and clarify aspects of Rendueles's position, I suggest that 'classic' technological determinism offers resources that are as relevant in an age of Netflix and TikTok as they were in the age of Fordist production processes. What links Ellul's analysis to that of Rendueles, and other technological determinist thinkers, is not a belief in technology as a monolithic and hostile inhuman force. Rather it is the conviction that, whilst technology has undoubtedly brought social benefits, those benefits have been secured not by the technological conforming to the social but by the social conforming to the technological.

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