

The 'inevitability' of a *Hi-Tech Utopia* in question

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Discussion paper

Abstract

While regressive ideologies of neoliberalism and neocorporatism continue to be advocated and implemented into policy under the maintenance of a geopolitical Cold War dichotomy, societies are being rapidly transformed into closed entities in which governments – while maintaining financial-economic and oligarchic structures – are being continuously tempted to neglect and abandon basic principles of democratic legal rights in favour of state capitalist interests. For citizens, all this has serious implications for their livelihoods as they have to face an increasingly repressive moralism that threatens to curtail their hard-won rights and freedoms. Yet the belief in progress seems to know no bounds.

How can this be explained, what are the alternatives and, above all, what is lacking in today's politics among numerous democratic and less democratic countries? We will argue briefly that a single-minded focus on technological progress seriously impedes the long project of modernity and its achievements on which free societies are founded.

Keywords: technocracy, utilitarianism, modernity, progress, social engineering, civil rights, political philosophy

Introduction

Since the emerging of a widespread Silicon-Valley related optimism and the advent of the digital revolution at the end of the last century, not only has the belief in technological progress soared, but societies have also changed dramatically. What once seemed all but unattainable has now come within overall reach, such as lightning-fast world-wide communication capabilities and colossal data processing. While the euphoria about this knows no bounds, the belief in progress, however, is taking a rather strange turn. For example, current talk of "strategic autonomy" is characterized by a retreat to longstanding *protectionism* that flatly disregards all developments in global interdependence. This does not demonstrate realism, but dumbing down. A blind focus on autonomous ICT and biotechnology will therefore – apart from the half-baked economic assumptions that usually underlie it – turn out to be a dead end and will only lead to a 'laboratory society' from which, in addition to a wealth of colors, all other indispensable expertise will have completely disappeared. A flattened *technoculture* that controls every detail of life then threatens to remain. Such a 'salvation state' is then little more than a terrifying dystopia.

Questions and answers

Can this tide be turned? That is very much the question. For all the justified comments one can make regarding such a faltering belief in progress, the positions taken seem unshakeable. In addition, technological as well as economic developments largely lead a life of their own. Certainly as long as (international) political decision-making continues to lag hopelessly behind such developments and fails to give them *direction*. The belief in progress has therefore become, in all respects, a rather *dogmatic* belief that fights all 'heresy' with fire and sword under penalty of 'inquisition'. Those who do not 'join in' are out and place themselves out of order. Now that even former critics have converted en masse to this unshakable faith, nothing seems to stand in the way of salvation. From left to right people are convinced that technology – and especially those of their own making – will propel society forward and will (be able to) solve many problems and issues. Whether it is energy extraction, climate control and environmental issues, wealth development, or conflict management — expectations are tumbling over each other and optimism is unstoppable. Science fiction is no longer fiction for many, but 'hard reality'. Dreams come true and lo and behold: problems disappear like snow in the sun. Education, therefore, does not fail to inculcate such phenomena with great emphasis, and this begins already during childhood. The vistas are unending. In the process, all 'mice' about the present pale into insignificance. Politics is therefore largely 'superfluous' in such eyes (if it is not already considered a completely 'obsolete' concept).

The poverty of such orientations is of no concern to many, as long as they are able to derive solid social positions that promise a comfortable existence. Those involved will not allow themselves to be denied or deprived of that. That is why 'debates' on this subject are presented as if they were 'irrefutable truths' beyond any doubt. The latter is particularly reinforced by the fact that numerous advisory reports are written in the same unquestioning tone, which the protagonists are only too happy to invoke. In short, the technocrats have 'right' on their side and this right needs no further explanation. Or "stagnation means decline" as they say. (Were it not that critics do not so much advocate 'standstill' but merely endeavour to expose the advocated 'progress' as a disguised *sur place* or as regression). Both technological engineering and their applications are certainly not always or in all respects a 'celebration', even though people derive many kinds of comfort and convenience from them. What matters in the end is *how* and *in whose hands* these achievements are deployed, and *for what purposes* they are used. In a fully exploited society, however, one need have few illusions about 'utility and necessity', which often prove more one-sided than pretended and serve predominantly selective interests. Whether it is medical technology, educational technology, environmental technology or

'organizational technology', they often remain 'playthings' in the hands of rather monomaniacally focused individuals who, as technocrats, imagine themselves lord and master at all the 'goodies' at their disposal. That does not alter the fact that there is demonstrable progress, but to present it as if this development offers a *panacea* for all problems is far from the truth. However, this belief has deep roots, so that questioning it almost tantamount to 'kamikaze', or at least is a risky undertaking that is certainly not universally appreciated. Yet this remains necessary, at least if the aforementioned issues and developments are not to take us all by surprise and there is nothing left to 'regulate' at all. This is not 'cultural pessimism', but an extension of earlier calls for skepticism and tempering of overblown expectations. Not that all the critics of yesteryear were right – certainly not – but rather that a little more distancing would be more appropriate instead of dashing frantically rather dazedly after non-sensical fantasies and dreams.

Especially when one considers that much 'ICT' is rickety (as in the case of failing governmental data communication systems) and also appears to be extremely vulnerable, then 'some skepticism' is certainly not an unnecessary luxury in our opinion. Nevertheless, entire societies have become completely dependent on such systems, so that one can no longer ignore this extremely vulnerable and dependent reality. Sooner or later, one will have to acknowledge that life has taken a technocratic turn that is far from benefiting everyone. Already advanced weapons systems are being developed that can cripple entire infrastructural data and communications networks ... so what does one want, this is definitely not fiction or gloom-and-doom. Fundamental questions are at stake but poverish or no answers at all are rendered, unless critical theory is embraced which we will outline in the next section.

Depoliticization: the persistent looking-away attitude

There is 'overdue maintenance' according to some government officials, but due to (a)political amnesia they 'forget' to add that we are facing some four decades of neoliberalism which has eroded institutional frameworks and social security of many citizens. Such statements are therefore not only embarrassing, but also extremely misleading. Especially when policymakers, in response to questions about the current state of affairs, systematically declare that "everything revolves around the economy" and that there would be little to worry about in this regard.

Would it really? *Whose* economy is one referring to, and *in what respect* would there subsequently be reason for euphoria and chest-beating? Last but not least, where then did all these successive (financial and economic) crises come from that do not exactly demonstrate a 'well-oiled machine'? In fact, totalized (macro-)economic figures often tell very little about concrete (social-)economic relations and certainly nothing about institutional power structures that can be quite disruptive as one should know. Moreover, one can question the proposition that 'the economy' is decisive. This is an outdated and overly simplistic representation of things that is being lied to again and again by political-social reality.

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In short, anyone who believes that totalized economic figures would provide a comprehensive insight into the fortunes and woes of the population simply misses the point of what adequate policy and governance are all about. It is therefore an apolitical approach with little meaning, although it is constantly being promoted for the stage. The insistence on (alleged) economic successes therefore primarily serves a politico-publicitary purpose, namely to appease emotions that could hinder the

¹ For a long time, for example, people clung to the idea that prosperity would automatically lead to general well-being and that GDP figures were a correct and sufficient indicator of this. However this concept has long been shown to be unsound, so this approach was replaced by the more comprehensive HDI (*Human Development Index*) figure and has since added inequality factors (HDI-I). The developed 'broad concept of welfare' is an attempt to give policy content to this concept.

advocated policy. Which means as much as trying to take the wind out of the sails of unwelcome criticism. (The cliché metaphor of 'half full and half empty glasses', still popular in management circles, but nevertheless worn to the bone as we know all too well...).

Yes, we could have a few more like that. In the same vein, Dutch people invariably talk about 'polder communities' as if local communities, as well as individual citizens, would be any match for oligarchic financial-economic conglomerates that, with the full consent of government and parliament, control a wide range of markets and bend them to their will. (Still a Dutch left-wing politician once declared bluntly: "politics is not about power"...). Crises therefore do not arise 'automatically' nor are they solved under mere reference to 'decisiveness' or 'good intentions'. One can probably fool a kindergarten class into believing that, but such fairy tales are unworthy of a mature democracy. This rhetoric really has had its day.

But make no mistake. Now that even the EU, with the approval of the environmental parties, is fully committed to 'self-governing (energy) communities', we are still far from getting rid of this. People refuse to see and acknowledge that there is only ONE 'community': *society as a whole*. If not, just abolish national states and all the puppetry of government and parliament. They are then completely superfluous. The only correct alternative is therefore to continue to approach societies as rightful entities and to meet all citizens in their rightful claims. After all, that remains the basis of all policies and governance that wish to invoke *legitimacy*. There is no other way.

Simply lining up the pockets of (major) shareholders is not by definition 'congruent' with the public interest, no matter what economic justification one might think is appropriate. Moreover, when this is accompanied by massive withdrawals of civil capital and the neglect of the public sector, as has been the case for decades now, it is good to recall Locke's words here and let the still topical meaning of this sink in:

"Legislative power is exercised by, but is not owned by, the legislative body.... Surely, if a power is granted to someone for the purpose of achieving an end, that purpose immediately limits that power as well. If he neglects or thwarts that purpose, then of course the agent can no longer claim the trust placed in him: the power expires and all power returns to the hands of those who had granted it.... Thus the community² itself retains at all times the supreme right to defend itself against the attempts and plans of anyone, not excluding the legislature, who would be so foolish or malicious as to make an attack on the liberties and property of its subjects." (Locke, J. *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, 1689)[transcr. vdK]

Yes, that's quite different compared to all the fallacies employed for failed policies. '*Mehr Schein als Sein*' does not thrive. Then let's not talk about 'Sollen' any further, since Kant's *categorical imperative* about the fundamental distinction between what **is** and what **ought to be or could be** still appears to be a bridge too far for most people some two and a half centuries after the fact, as Habermas has demonstrated throughout his long working life and has continually tried to bring to attention. Yet many seem (with or without reference to the deconstructivists³) very wrongly convinced that quite a few

² Note: although the concepts of 'the State' and 'the People' have merged considerably, it remains important to distinguish between the two. In Locke's time, however, 'the State' was still linked to (notions of absolutist) monarchical powers, while 'the Community' referred to citizens and their legal representatives as modern democratic states were emerging. Whether there is a '*volonté generale*' or not, the notion of the *common good* remains strongly linked to the *sovereignty* of the people which the (modern) state has to respect to the full.

³ Here *deconstructivism* refers to the philosophical movement which holds that phenomena are pluri-interpretable and this therefore constitutes a (culturally determined 'perception or experience' panopticon.

institutional matters would simply be 'interchangeable' and that this would not matter as long as 'the goals' – whatever they may be – are achieved (even if only on paper). Habermas:

[Foucault's theory of] *genealogy* is overtaken by a fate similar to that which Foucault had seen in the human sciences: To the extent that it retreats into the reflectionless objectivity of a nonparticipatory, ascetic description of kaleidoscopically changing practices of power, genealogical historiography emerges from its cocoon as precisely the presentistic, relativistic, cryptonormative illusory science that it does not want to be.' (Habermas, J. *Some questions concerning the theory of power; Foucault again*, in: Kelly, M. (ed.) *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, 1994: 88. See also Habermas, J. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987) [1985] and Habermas, J. *Modernity: an unfinished project*, in: Passerin d'Entrèves, M. and Benhabib, S. (eds.), *Habermas and the unfinished project of modernity*, 1997)

We are still a long way from a morality that is both 'practical and just' and that nicely formulated principles alone do not suffice. The project of *modernity* therefore not only shows 'overdue maintenance', but certainly also lacks essential continuity mechanisms that cannot be ignored. The *social contract* is one of these, as are principles of *separation of powers*, *mandates and identity determination*, all of which are of inviolable importance in determining free will within a democratic legal order. The relationship between *freedom* and *equality* is permanently in question here, just as *utilitarianism* needs to be permanently critically examined. The paradox, however, is that while the concept of social engineering is embraced technocratically, it is at the same time rendered virtually impossible and dismantled *politically*.

Although contesting alleged utilitarian-technological notions of progress is far from new, the only workable alternative is to define and *tackle the political orientation of planning* in such a way that the supposed 'inevitability' of a technocratic laboratory society that would be universally conducive to salvation no longer takes possession of all-important political policy choices which consequently lose out or are omitted altogether. This monomaniacal folly only plays into the hands of a handful of venture capitalists and will eventually lead to a *completely controlled society* as also already can be observed in abundance elsewhere in the world. Do we really want to go in this direction, or will we come to our senses? in all the contemporary commotion one can chew on that from left to right, were it not for the fact that good governance is not self-evident. Especially not if *myths* are used to guide it. Every administrator must adequately justify the political and ideological choices that are being made and should make all relevant information available *in advance*. There is no room for fallacies or playing on cheap sentiments. Idealism is all very fine, but without a sense of reality, issues quickly degenerate into constricting bureaucratic formalism. Legitimacy must be demonstrated time and again. Technocracy and economics are not sanctifying, but can at most be used as means to an end. The primacy of law is the highest value as we say, but then rightful law must be *at the service of all citizens* and not at the safeguard of selective partial interests of a few.

The 'grand narratives' (of knowledge acquisition, logic, truth-telling and the determination of being) are rejected and it is taken as a itself that a subjective irrationality would be leading (hence philosophers such as Foucault, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein are unprecedentedly popular today). To that extent, they radically turn against formulated modernity principles of reason and rationality, against which, among others, Habermas has firmly opposed since this easily degenerates into complete nihilism and as a result any reasonable determination of direction is lost (see cit.) This movement can be seen as a serious *cesura* with the development of modernity and formed the basis for 'postmodern' views of the state as they became commonplace with neoliberalism. Fragmentation of policy, governance and societal orientations are therefore not 'just' phenomena, but a direct outgrowth of such orientations. A certain *pathology* cannot be denied in all this (Freyenhagen 2018; Jacobs 2016; Hirvonen 2018; Laitinen & Särkelä 2018) which can be related to numerous contemporary issues.

Concluding remarks

In short, anyone who thinks that formulating 'goals' that go with the flow will provide adequate guarantees for citizens is mistaken. One may lose oneself in dreams, but socially responsible action requires knowledge, skill and a – loyal and generous – steady hand. This is sorely lacking. Surely, 'challenges' have to be met, but should not be misused for second rate or political marketing purposes. The same is true of *geopolitics*, which should not be abused as a playground for deluded power-hungry types either. Such hegemonic aspirations and claims should be limited on all sides of the international spectrum. This, however, cannot be left to a handful of governments as apparently seems the case nowadays, but must be taken up directly by the *entire international legal community*. If they prove unwilling or unable to do so, one should not be surprised that this 'regulating' continues to take place on the basis of selective interests and that no one benefits in the end. To continue on this path is tantamount to taking very great risks, no matter how much one may think one is on the right side of history. Modeling reality into dream images always turns up against itself, especially when one is guided by false representations of reality, acting complacently or haughtily. In truly modern times, political decision-making should be shielded from this. However, this requires a different type of politicians and administrators than those who believe that societies would be worse off without their 'indispensable management skills'. Unfortunately, the opposite is true.

People realize too little how compelling technocratic culture has become in many respects and how dependent societies have become on it. For all the euphoria about 'progress', this is a development that should not be underestimated, and one that calls for profound reflection before embracing the 'salvation' that is on offer. After all, what is the value of 'a regulated solidarity' that serves merely energy companies, insurance companies and other institutionalised investors? That is not communal advocacy to the benefit of all, but vicious financial capitalism that has little to do with 'liberty' or 'equality'.

A few recommendations.

First of all politics is not about supposed 'harmony', but always about *conflicting interests* vying for priority. From this, some consensus must be distilled that is *workable and beneficial* to social development. This leads to the following:

- i. Bring *depoliticization* to a halt by addressing political and ideological issues in a *truly open*, that is discursive manner, in which paralyzing 'political correctness' is no longer policy-determining in making necessary decisions.
- ii. Restore the *public sphere and the public domain* to their constitutional intentions.
- iii. Give way to the *political and legislative primacy* of the assembly of people's representatives.
- iv. Stop the *paternalistic approach to citizenship* as if all citizens were complete ignorant fools and respect their equal rights to the full.
- v. Make sure that *oligarchic financial and market structures* are subdued to *democratically controlled authority*.
- vi. Don't let *technocrats* and their managing assistants rule and control society as if they have all the wisdom. Make sure that only *reliable and experienced administrators* develop and execute necessary plans that have been consented widely.
- vii. Beware of *nationalistic sentiments and tendencies* that undermine *the rule of law*.
- viii. Ensure reasonable *income and wealth distribution* as well as *balanced allocation of public goods and services* and establish society-wide *social security* according to constitutional principles. (A '*second Bill of Rights*' may be necessary to achieve this).

- ix. *Stop risky war mongering and restrict the excessively money-spending military-industrial complex.*
- x. *And finally: keep in mind that 'economic prosperity' does not automatically imply general well-being.*

If these guiding principles are respected, there is a good chance that many contemporary social issues can be turned around for the better. If not, it will remain muddling through in many respects, with all the destabilizing consequences that this entails.

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