CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In this text, I will offer a critical interpretation of technological culture. While such interpretations were common in this century until about twenty years ago, today they appear outdated and out-landish, at least in their broad form. Narrower critiques, which focus on the technology of war, are still offered and received, but critiques which indict technological culture itself are no longer acceptable. The hope of both the East and the West is now cen-tered on technological innovation and development, and 'less-developed' countries look to technology as the key to progress. Any challenge to this technological fetishism, therefore, is surely and sorely resented. Nevertheless, this text is, on the one hand, an attempt to revitalize the critical attitude of such thinkers as Jacques Ellul and Martin Heidegger, who viewed technological culture not only as a threat to alternative ways of life but also as a threat to the receptiveness to as yet unconceived possibilities. It is because of this menacing nature of technological culture that I seek to criticize and challenge it. But, on the other hand, this argument differs from many earlier critiques in several important respects.

To begin with, this text does not claim to reveal anything about the essence of technology, anything that is present in or underlies every manifestation of technology. Rather, what I offer here is nothing more than a perspective on technological culture. As a perspective, it is one among others, without any claim to special status because it has glimpsed something timeless in the phenomenon of technology.

To put it differently, this perspective treats technology as something which can be thought of along various lines, none of which is capable of revealing the heart of the matter of technolo-

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Unless otherwise noted, all emphasis and parenthesis in quoted material is that of the author quoted, and any brackets are mine.

gy. It is only by approaching technology from various perspectives that one can begin to understand and, perhaps, resist it. And there is no reason for believing that after experiencing technology from various perspectives, one will be able to completely grasp it and utter a final word on the subject. So in regard to those interpretations which have been offered as revelations of the essence of technology, it is not so much that I find them wrong, but that I find they claim too much for their insights.

Another difference between this and many other perspectives on technology is that the one offered here does not trace the phenomenon of technique (Ellul), or the machine (Mumford), or *techne* (Heidegger), back to its origins. If the goal was to uncover the essence of technology, perhaps it would be necessary to follow the leaders back in their search for the original manifestations of technology. But even if one abandons the hope of glimpsing essences, there is still the temptation to extend one's perspective to include many of the historical developments of technology. Such a historical foundation provides a certain legitimacy to one's perspective, in the sense that one would appear to have a thorough understanding of the issue, and in the sense that one would be able to engage other leading perspectives (e.g., those of Jacques Ellul and Lewis Mumford) on many points.

Even if one could effectively borrow the legitimating form of essential, historical interpretations while renouncing their exaggerated claims, there is still reason for resisting the temptation to subsume the history of technology under one's perspective. By tying one's interpretation of modern technical culture to a long tradition of technical apparatuses, one recognizes the important innovations in technological development, but at risk of losing sight of the web of relations, or better, the lines of power, through which technology flows in modernity. And it is through such an ensemble of lines that technology helps to form and shape the modern self. Since the primary concern of this text is the fetishistic attitude of the modern self toward technology, I will focus only on modern technology, and even then the concern will be primarily with the relation between people and technical culture, and not simply with the features of technical apparatuses.

It must be emphasized that this imposition of limits on the historical treatment of technology is not offered as a method-

ological principle which is to be universally applied. I am not making the claim that modernity can be understood only on its own terms, that only by focusing on the modern can one understand modernity. On the contrary, this text will develop a broad historical perspective, but it is one that does not take the phenomenon of technology as its central theme. Instead, modern technology will be portrayed as an element of a different historical line, one which reveals aspects of technology often overlooked by histories of technical development.

In its treatment of modern technology, this perspective differs in a third way from many other perspectives on technology. This difference lies in what I, but not they, would describe as the "line of attack." Many interpreters of modern technology focus on the way in which technology expands and invades every facet of nature and/or society, establishing an order throughout. I have in mind here interpreters such as Ellul and Heidegger.[1] There is no doubt that technology does expand in such a manner and that it does tend to engulf not only nature, but all human activities as well. But by focusing on this expansion, and mapping out the advances of technology, one does little to foster resistance to the power of technology. Indeed, Ellul's monolithic portrayal of modernity in *The Technological Society* leaves virtually no room for resistance. But there is resistance to technical culture.

A paradoxical example of this resistance is the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, which rejects the technological culture of the West.[2] In its resistance to this culture, fundamentalism has indeed employed certain military techniques and apparatuses from the West and has also developed terroristic techniques of its own, but the point is that this technology is directed against the ever-expanding technical culture in order to resist it. And even within technical culture itself there are subterranean economies which lie beyond the control of the economic techniques of the state, acts of sabotage and protests which are intended to thwart the deployment of new military and nuclear-power technology and, more recently, living wills and suicide machines which resist modern medical technology. Without getting into the merits of any of these forms of resistance, the point is simply that technical culture is not nearly so tightly ordered or efficient as some have portrayed it. Resistance, however effective, occurs at various levels.

In this attempt to challenge technical culture, I will not focus on the imperialistic character of modern technology. This is not to deny that it might be worthwhile to draw a map which complements the one of technological expansionism, and points out the various ways in which technology is resisted as it expands in society and nature.[3] But the resistance which this argument strives to incite is found in a different area, or on a different level, and therefore requires a different approach. Instead of focusing on the way in which technical culture expands, this text is concerned with the way in which it becomes narrow and pointed, the way it penetrates and shapes modern individuals and renders them techno-fetishists. In other words, the concern here is with the way in which technology affects the values of individuals.

Two basic questions can be asked at this level. First, what is the value of technology to modern individuals? And second, why do they hold this value in such high esteem that, even when faced with technological dangers and dilemmas, they hope for solutions that will enable them to maintain and develop technical culture? Before I begin to answer these questions, however, there are a few points that must be made about inquiries carried out at the level of values.

The first of these points is that the interpretation of technological culture from the perspective of values does not constitute a novel approach to this question. Early in the twentieth century Max Scheler pointed out that, despite its claim of value-neutrality, modern science (as well as its technological application) was guided by a particular value—namely, the domination of nature.[4] It is worthwhile at this point to briefly examine Scheler's insight into technical culture, both because there are certain similarities between Scheler's approach to the question of technology and mine, and because Scheler's insights were developed by later theorists in a manner I will assiduously avoid. But even beyond these reasons for looking at Scheler's thoughts on technology, the value Scheler ultimately identified as dominant in technical culture is a complement to the one I will emphasize.

To begin with, Scheler's approach to understanding a given culture consciously focused on values. It was not just that scientific knowledge was not value-free; for Scheler, no form of

knowledge or action could be. Echoing Nietzsche's claim that "the question of values is more *fundamental* than the question of certainty,"[5] Scheler wrote that "all perceptions and thoughts, with regard to the laws governing the *selection* of their *possible* objects, and, not any less fundamental, all our actions, are rooted in the *conditions of valuation and drive-life*."[6]

Nietzsche's "profound influence"[7]upon Scheler, however, extended far beyond the latter's general recognition of the primacy of values and valuation. Scheler also shared Nietzsche's critical perspective toward the dominant values of a culture and relied heavily on Nietzsche's genealogy of Christian morality for insights into the values of modernity. While Nietzsche identified the resentment which the weaker, priestly caste felt toward the stronger, aristocratic types as the primary motivation for Christian morality and its modern variants,[8]Scheler also pointed to resentment as the primary motive beneath modern values.

The shift in values which marked the break between the medieval and modern periods, according to Scheler, was the substitution of the value of utility for the spiritual values which were predominant in medieval culture. And this transformation was motivated by the resentment that the bourgeoisie felt toward the values of the more spiritual, aristocratic types. As Scheler put it, utilitarianism was the "chief manifestation of the *ressentiment* slave revolt in modern morality."[9]

Later in his career, Scheler changed his mind about the dominant value of modernity, especially in regard to the technological prowess of this age.

> The basic value that guides modern technology is not the invention of economical or 'useful' machines.... It aims at something much higher.... It is the idea and value of *human* power and human *freedom vis-a-vis* nature that ensouled the great centuries of 'inventions and discoveries'—by no means just an idea of utility. It concerns itself with the *power* drive, its growing *predominance* over nature *before* all other drives.[10]

Scheler pointed out that in the feudal period, the power-drive had been directed at the domination of other persons, but in the modern period, the domination of nature was the object of the power-drive; he called this modern drive "the will to control

nature."[11] Some contemporary thinkers have further developed Scheler's insight into modernity's drive to dominate nature, but before turning to this development I must point out other similarities between Scheler's perspective on technological culture and the one to be developed in this text.

Scheler and I are both heavily indebted to Nietzsche for the conceptual schemes that we develop. Following Nietzsche's insights into the primacy of values and valuation, Scheler uncovered the values which underlie the professed neutrality (i.e., value-freedom) of modern science and technology. And, of course, the larger historical framework into which Scheler fits the modern ethos is a Nietzschean one. I, too, take my clues about the value of technology from Nietzsche, although the value I will emphasize is neither the value of utility nor the domination of nature. I take my lead from Zarathustra, who said upon his return to others and their cities:

> I go among this people and keep my eyes open: they have become *smaller* and are becoming ever smaller: *and their doctrine of happiness and virtue is the cause.*
> For they are modest even in virtue—for they want ease. But only a modest virtue is compatible with ease.[12]

This desire for ease will be the primary focus of this text. For etymological reasons which will be discussed in the following chapter, I choose to call the object of this desire "convenience" rather than ease. In any case, the main contention of this argument will be that the value of technology in modernity is centered on technology's ability to provide convenience. The aim of my text, however, is not to lament the smallness or mediocrity of modern individuals and their virtues. It is rather to throw some light on, and thereby loosen, the hold which technology has on modernity. The desire for convenience seems to be an integral part of that hold—that is, an integral part of the modern self.

The larger historical trend into which I will ultimately fit my discussion of convenience is also a trend which Nietzsche traced, and in this, too, my argument bears a certain resemblance to Scheler's. While Scheler turned to the first essay of *The Genealogy of Morals* for his historical perspective, I will rely on the third essay, in which Nietzsche outlines the history of the ascetic ideal.

Although a claim that technical culture somehow fits in with the history of asceticism may seem incomprehensible at this point, this connection should become clearer once the idea of convenience has been fleshed out.

One more similarity between Scheler and myself must be noted, and this similarity has to do with the manner in which we approach the values of the technical age. In identifying utility and, later, the will to control nature as the primary values of this age, Scheler's aim was to criticize those values by showing how they emerged from a certain baseness. In this critical endeavor, Scheler can be thought of as a genealogist, at least in the sense of genealogy expressed by Gilles Deleuze:

> Genealogy means both the value of origin and the origin of values. Genealogy is as opposed to absolute values as it is to relative or utilitarian ones. Genealogy signifies the differential element of values from which their value itself derives. Genealogy thus means origin or birth, but also difference or distance in the origin. Genealogy means nobility and baseness, nobility and vulgarity, nobility and decadence in the origin. The noble and the vulgar, the high and the low—this is the truly genealogical and critical element.[13]

I must emphasize that the claim being made here is not that Scheler was a thoroughgoing genealogist. Despite Nietzsche's influence, Scheler did attempt to construct an absolute hierarchy of values,[14] and he also tried to rescue the essence of Christianity from Nietzsche's attack.[15] But in regard to his interpretation of the underlying value of modernity, Scheler was doing genealogy. He treated neither utility nor the will to control nature as the logical outcome of historical progress or as a value grounded in some fact of human existence. Rather, these values were regarded as the outcome of certain shifts in relations of force, as the outcome of a reversal in the struggle between the noble and the base. In my treatment of the value of convenience, I share this genealogical attitude toward values, which treats them as the signs of a struggle, and I also attempt to criticize and reevaluate this particular value.

In a sense, Scheler and I offer complementary genealogies of modern values. The value upon which Scheler focused—the

domination of nature—has been the value which guides the cutting edge of technology; it is the value pursued by the leaders of technological progress, the scientists and technicians. The value of convenience, on the other hand, is the value of the masses, of those who consume the products of technical culture.[16] But, as will become apparent, the value of convenience (in an extended sense of the word) has come to lead certain aspects of technological innovation and development as well. For now, however, all I want to do is point out the complementarity of Scheler's genealogical project and the one offered here.

While Scheler's genealogical impulse marks a particular affinity between our perspectives on modernity, this same impulse distinguishes Scheler from certain others who have developed his insight into the domination of nature. I have in mind here theorists such as Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and William Leiss, all of whom can be considered critical theorists in the sense first articulated by Horkheimer.[17] These thinkers coupled Scheler's insight with the dialectic, thereby eliminating "the truly genealogical and critical element," or stated differently, the Nietzschean element, of Scheler's thought. Since Scheler is valuable to me primarily for that Nietzschean element, I must briefly examine this coupling of the will to control nature and the dialectic. Such an examination will reveal the grounds for my avoidance in this text of any dialectical interpretation of the value of convenience. It will also lay the foundation for the claim which will be made later that critical theory (Marcuse, in particular), rather than pulling in the reins on technology actually spurs it on into new areas of development.

Critical theorists such as those mentioned above accept, tacitly or explicitly, Scheler's claim that science is not value-free, but rather serves the value of dominating nature.[18] But these theorists point out a shortcoming of Scheler's thought: he neglected to take into account the social context in which such domination occurs. Consequently, Scheler remained blind to the fact that under existing social conditions of injustice and inequality, the scientific domination of nature results in the ever-increasing domination of people through—and by—technology. In the words of William Leiss, "Advances in technology clearly enhance the power of ruling groups within societies and in the relations among nations;

and as long as there are wide disparities in the distribution of power among individuals, social groups, and states, technology will function as an instrument of domination"[19]—the domination of people, that is.

It is here that the dialectic is grafted onto Scheler's thought. The will to dominate nature is rendered contradictory, irrational by this negativity of social injustice and inequality. And through the elimination, or negation, of this negative social atmosphere the will to dominate nature can be rendered rational, and technology will finally be able to fulfill its original goal of promoting human freedom and security.

Through the use of the dialectic, therefore, critical theory has been able to salvage the will to control nature. The irrational, dangerous trajectory of technology in modernity stems not from the value of dominating nature, but from the injustice of advanced industrial society. Critical thought, consequently, must work toward the elimination of relations of domination and subordination among people. As Marcuse put it, this elimination is "the only truly revolutionary exigency, and the event that would validate the achievements of industrial civilization."[20] It would also validate the will to control nature, and the critical theorists mentioned here do indeed expect that any just society of the future would have to carry on the conquest of nature.[21]

This salvaging which is accomplished by critical theory's use of the dialectic is precisely what makes it unacceptable to me. Instead of carrying out a ruthless criticism of what Scheler identified as the will to control nature, critical theory ends up making it acceptable, rational. This reveals the extent of the dialectic's critical capacities. It is able to turn things on their heads, transforming the decadent will to dominate nature into a noble goal to be pursued into the future, but this dialectic is not capable of cutting off the head of such a decadent value and being done with it. Given the context in which this discussion of the dialectic has emerged, Gilles Deleuze's judgement of it seems particularly appropriate:

> It [the dialectic] *is reactive forces that express themselves in opposition, the will to nothingness that expresses itself in the labour of the negative.* The dialectic is the natural ideology of *ressentiment* and bad conscience. It is thought in the perspec-

tive of nihilism and from the standpoint of reactive forces...
powerless to create new ways of thinking and feeling.[22]

From my perspective, however, the most objectionable fea-
ture of the dialectic is not so much its *"ressentiment,"* which is
revealed in its formal properties of negation and reaction, but its
"bad conscience"—that is, its inability to forget, to let go of bad
memories and nihilistic values. It is primarily for this reason that
my treatment of the value of convenience will not be dialectical. I
will not portray convenience as a certain negativity which has
derailed the rational progress of science and technology, and
which must be negated so that technical culture can become non-
contradictory and capable of fulfilling its promise (threat). My
goal is not to save technical culture, but to undermine it. I will
also not portray convenience as an inherently noble value which
has itself been sidetracked by some social negativity, such as eco-
nomic and political injustice, the elimination of which would
allow convenience to flower in an environment of reason and
freedom. From my perspective, the desire for convenience is a
weed, not a flower, and my objective is to uproot it.

While the perspective that I am developing may appear
extreme (with its images of decapitations and vegicide), and per-
haps unreasonable (in its implied belief that a value which has
been carried along and fostered by modern tradition can actually
be uprooted), such excesses seem to me justified by those very
considerations which would give rise to these objections. Because
it is so deeply ingrained in modern culture, the value of conve-
nience can only be challenged by an aggressive attack.[23] A reck-
less, all-out effort is required just to create the space from which
this value can be challenged.

Additional considerations justify the excesses of this genealo-
gy of convenience, but these have less to do with the traditional
inertia of convenience than with the broader tradition of liberal
individualism. Any inquiry into values faces resistance from this
liberal tradition, which recognizes at the core of the individual a
private realm which lies beyond the reach of social and cultural
forces.[24] This private realm is one of beliefs, intentions, desires,
and—most importantly for this text—values. Although liberal-
ism's claim of privacy in this sphere was challenged by nine-

teenth-century social theorists such as Hegel and Marx, it still exerts enormous influence on the self-understanding of modern individuals and is tightly bound up with their claim to freedom. Stuart Hampshire articulates this influence when he writes, "The man who is comparatively free in the conduct of his life is active in the adoption of his own attitudes and of his own way of life; his decisions and intentions are the best guide to his future action; and just this is the significance of calling him free."[25] It is to be expected, therefore, that an argument such as mine, which claims that a certain value is not freely chosen by individuals, but is demanded by various facets of the technological order of modernity, will be met with a degree of self-preserving (in a very literal sense) denial.

This liberal resistance to inquiries into values is compounded in the case of my argument because that argument is an invasion of privacy in a second sense, one which is derived in part from the classical Greek conception of privacy. For the ancient Greeks, the private realm was not located within the individual, as a sphere of beliefs, values, and intentions, but rather, it was located in the household. My inquiry into the value of convenience will begin in the modern household, which, I will argue, still retains elements of the classical conception of privacy. I will begin in the household because it is there that convenience reigns, there that the self is shaped by the demands of the technological order, and there that individuals 'buy into' technical culture.

My argument challenges at once the privacy of the individual and the privacy of the household (although these are not unrelated spheres). Because my text is an invasion of privacy, or a trespass, in this double sense, it is bound to face resistance. To some extent, therefore, the success of this text can be measured in the amount of resistance that it evokes. But the most serious threat posed to individuals today does not come from arguments that challenge the privacy of the realm of beliefs, values, and desires, but rather from unchallenged forces that penetrate that sphere. The value of convenience is one such force.

The course of this genealogy of convenience begins with an examination of the modern household, in the context of Hannah Arendt's interpretation of that household in *The Human Condition*. My purpose in the second chapter is to challenge Arendt's

claim that modernity is characterized by a "reverence" for the body. Ultimately, I will argue that the consumption of convenience in modernity reflects a certain contempt for the body and the limits it imposes, and for those readers familiar with Arendt's argument, it should be apparent that there is a clash between her interpretation of modernity and mine.

After discussing Arendt's argument, I turn to some contemporary Marxist interpretations of modern consumption practices. In part, my aim here is to acknowledge that these Marxists have moved beyond the rigid structuralism of earlier generations of Marxist scholars, but my concern also is to indicate limitations of this Marxist perspective on consumption. Ultimately, these writers interpret modern consumption practices as being determined by the demands of the production process, and this blinds them to other important influences on consumption practices, especially in the case of the United States, which most of these writers accept as the epitome of modernity.

I then offer a very different interpretation of American consumption standards, one which challenges the interpretation of the Marxists I criticize, but which is nonetheless based on a particular insight Marx had concerning the uniqueness of the United States. Marx realized that the spatial dimensions of the United States posed serious challenges to capitalism, even if he did not recognize the impact that unlimited space would have on modern consumption practices. Capitalism's response to the problem posed by unlimited space, I argue, played an important role in establishing the value of convenience as the driving force behind modern attitudes toward technology.

This genealogy of convenience, however, is not simply or purely materialist. Alongside the spatial situation in the United States, other factors played equally important roles in the emergence of convenience as a primary value in modernity. The decline in religious belief commonly associated with modernity is one of these factors, and I focus on this dimension of the technological question late in the text. I approach this subject in the context of Max Weber's controversial argument in *The Protestant Ethic* and expand that argument with the help of Nietzsche's insights into Protestantism and asceticism. Ultimately, I will claim that the fetishistic attitudes toward technology and the

rampant consumption of 'conveniences' which characterize modernity are a form of asceticism. In one of the last chapters of the text, I uncover evidence of this ascetic dimension of modernity in several modern political thinkers, ranging from liberals to radicals.

The thread which runs throughout this wide-ranging array of evidence, I should perhaps reiterate, is the value of convenience. Although this value is not usually the object of discussion or reflection, it nevertheless holds a highly esteemed position today and guides the consumption choices of individuals in modern technical culture. What I hope to accomplish by following these very different lines of approach to this value is to throw convenience into relief, to make it noticeable, questionable, and hopefully, challengeable.