

TURNING AWAY FROM TECHNOLOGY

by Stephanie Mills

Every time I attempt to put my finger on the reason why we should turn away from technology-as-matrix-and-answer, the reasons are either so many that I wind up with a cloud of horror stories and appalling prospects suffocating me or so inef-fable that I find myself groping to name the qualities of life, mind, and spirit that seem to be going extinct in this fin-de-siècle. I may have stumbled into the newly fashionable fuzzy logic, or possibly just suc-cumbed to apocalyptic hysteria. More likely, burning in my animal heart, the abhorrence of a world where everything is humanmade, for sale, captively bred, or under "ecosystem management," and a society where everything that is not expressly regu-lated is no longer possible, cannot be voiced but in a howl.

Our species evolved on earth over millions of years in natural surround-ings. Sounds self-evident in our post-Darwinian time, but we don't take being organisms very seriously. Technological, mechanical, and fos-sil-fuel surrogates, as well as syn-thetic chemistries, have for the last 250 years or so functioned in lieu of a biological base for the expansion of the modern enterprise.

But an exponentially growing

population dependent not only on nonrenewable resources but on "ecosystem services" like soil fertili-ty, O₂--CO₂-exchange—is in trouble long before the last drop is sucked out of the last oil well. No end of technological fixes—like the Green Revolution, nuclear energy "too cheap to meter," fiercer antibiotics, a hydrogen economy, genetic engineer-ing, and nanotechnology—have been offered as the next steps, the latest remedies to the problems that inevitably followed on human attempts throughout history to tran-scend our organic essence and to treat the Earth as an economy rather than an ecosystem. It's an epistemo-logical problem. However new the technology, it's still more of the same misunderstanding. Thus we find our-selves at a singular moment: Not that civilizations haven't collapsed before, leaving deserts in their wake, but because this civilization is now glob-al, there's nowhere left to turn. Except away from the mechanical to the organic, to restore what we can of culture and place. Or, in a final, cli-mactic techno-fantasy, to designate other solar systems as Enterprise Zones. Bizarre as it may seem, the global market is poised to lift off, by technological means, leaving denud-

ed fields and hillsides, festering favelas, flooded coastlines, and bil-lions of redundant human beings light years behind here on poor old Mother Earth.

Insofar as the value of any exist-ence, whether it be that of a student or of a forest, is articulated in eco-nomic terms, we've allowed life to be regarded as a machine. And because the vast majority of humanity—peas-ants and farmers included, to say nothing of nerds and policy wonks—no longer participates in, or knows the spontaneity of, wild nature, the metaphor of mechanism and the ethic of instrumentality are rein-forced throughout human conscious-ness. Why would we feel any filial responsibility toward life on Earth? The market paradigm, the idea that everything and everyone on the plan-et can rightly be treated as a poten-tial commodity, threatens the com-plete de-souling of the world.

Feminists worked hard to advance the understanding that the personal is the political, that the gender-based power relationships of every-day life are a significant expression of our values and very often a prom-ising, if difficult, arena for change. The technological also is the political. Every technology concen-

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trates and extends power, amplifies some effort or effect. Even the least technology is no unqualified boon. Technology determines the politics of our species' relationship with the rest of life on the planet, for one thing, to the extent of reshaping the terrain and the composition of the atmosphere as well. All military technology—from the war club to the geostationary reconnaissance satellite trumps politics. Advanced medical technology and artificial intelligence would like to change the politics of mortality. Neuroscience would objectify the mystery of the self and otherness out of existence, arguing that it's all physiological. This is a state of extreme technological excess.

In some regions, perhaps there is a maldistribution of certain appropriate technologies—bicycles, sewing machines, efficient cookstoves—basic tools for a decent subsistence. But among the world's well-to-do, there's a bankruptcy, a pathos evident in all the frivolous gadgetry—from electronic haircurlers and video games to reclining chairs that give massages, to children's toys with treacherous voices that offer good, if insipid, counsel—consumer items as substitutes for some of the most elemental and affective human capabilities. These technologies—and their more sinister big brothers—are so excessive that the line between the human and the synthetic has long since begun to blur.

For now the vast majority of urbanites and suburbanites continue in ways of life utterly dependent on the good functioning of a megatechnological infrastructure from power plants to transmission grids to sewage treatment facilities to electronic banking to supertankers to elevators to agribusiness to interstate highways. Either the common sense to recognize the precariousness of our situation has been engineered out of us, or our personal and social imagination and memory have been stupefied by the last half-century of technological excess.

Yet nothing is inevitable if we say no. That kind of nay-saying is the antidote to despair. As we are seeing, there is a vast and diverse community of sane and decent people arguing that there must be alternatives to the totalitarianism of trade and technology.

We should, at the very least, shun systems and technologies that will make it impossible for us ever to change our minds and arrive at ways of living in place more respectful of, and suited to, the biological reality that made and sustains us.

It seems only reasonable that human communities ought to look before leaping into absolute technocracy. Simple justice and civic responsibility require a well-informed, empowered public considering what technology is doing in our lives and whether it really promotes the good we would wish for ourselves and for posterity. We should, at the very least, shun systems and technologies that will make it impossible for us ever to change our minds and arrive at ways of living in place more respectful of, and suited to, the biological reality that made and sustains us. The wonder is that despite the power and pervasiveness of the propaganda for megatechnology, a great many people understand that technology will not solve problems caused by technology and that transnational corporations won't provide a living for the multitude. Unlike the proponents of mass technology and economic globalization, the activists and thinkers mounting this critique don't stand to profit from their brand of advocacy. These are lifetime civil society folks. Their concern is Gandhian, for the least person. They don't confuse a juggernaut's momentum with progress.

Most of the necessary work in the world does not involve "symbolic

manipulation," but looking after children, digging in the soil, or seining the sea, and dealing with plants and animals—direct engagement with living beings. And in the world outside the steel and glass campus, community does not consist of like-minded people e-mailing themselves, but of small groups bound together by vicinity, economy, and mutual aid. It is not on fusion power or fiber optics, but on just such work, in just such communities, that the human future depends.

Right here in my country, down on the ground, there are countless cultures of resistance and regeneration whose members, located in real places, will never be on the talk shows. These citizens have their counterparts all over the planet, in places where the stakes are even greater and the sanctions are severe. These are people, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, who will resist with their last ounce of strength rather than allow the natural world and the dignity of the person to disappear forever into the market and the machine.