

Technology and the Conservative— Classical Liberal Debate

S T E P H E N J . T O N S O R

CONSERVATIVES and classical liberals have thought themselves to be at odds on many issues. In programs for political and social action they have often believed themselves to be diametrically opposed. In contrasting life-style and social posture they are often easily identifiable and still more easily satirized and burlesqued.

One is tempted to ask whether or not they have anything in common or whether some anti-Hegelian force which I shall call the "cunning of nonsense" has not thrown them together in some contemporaneous living arrangement without benefit of Providence or hope of divorce. Perhaps there is no common element in these two opposing styles which only the cement of opposition to a common enemy holds together.

However, common enemies are the basis for alliance rather than friendship and the source of uneasy toleration rather than identity. Are there attitudes and values common to both positions, common assumptions, which make it possible for a modern Edmund Burke to support the economic theories of a modern Adam Smith? Must the response of a modern Dr. Johnson to a modern David Hume be "You lie, Sir," on being introduced, and the response of the modern David Hume be "You are an S.O.B."! To be sure the level of civility has improved in the intervening 200 years though I am not at all certain that there has been an improvement in the level of intellectual comprehension.

Rather than treat the whole body of conservative-classical liberal debate I think it tactically best to isolate a specific issue in the hope that the single issue will lead directly to the heart of conservative and classical liberal differences and will make easily apparent whether or not there can be any identity of views or whether the rela-

tions between conservatives and classical liberals must always be at the level of pragmatism, convenience and accommodation.

In order to conduct my investigation with a maximum of force and directness and at the same time preserve a measure of observational objectivity and historical neutrality I have chosen the issue of contrasting conservative and classical liberal attitudes to the question of science, technology and rationalization because the movement toward rationalization, science and technology has been generally recognized by historians, at least since Max Weber, as the characteristic and distinguishing element in Western culture and as providing the civilizational dynamic which informs Western society. Moreover, I have chosen the problem of technology and rationalization in part because of the huge body of historical debate and discussion which surrounds the question.¹ The length and comprehensiveness of the debate and the quantity and quality of the literature, I think encourage a more mature discussion than would otherwise be possible.

In the second place, this debate is not only intellectually central to the discussion of conservative-classical liberal positions; it is a debate which is practically important and one whose importance grows with every passing day. The outcome of this debate will quite literally determine our national future and the longrun prospects of the human race. It is not simply a question of whether or not we shall be cold and hungry next winter or whether or not we shall be incinerated in a nuclear holocaust but whether or not the human race as it has existed for the past 10,000 years will continue to exist.

In the third place, I have chosen the topic because of the importance of the question to the development of political theory. From the outset observers and commentators have believed that they have discerned a relationship between politics and technology. From Max Weber's "iron cage" to the current crop of nervous nannies among the political scientists there have been widely expressed fears that technological change would totally transform or simply abolish politics. In an article, *Politics and Technology*,² David C. Menninger comments on the breakdown of the political process in the contemporary world.

...The extremity of this prospect is not forced, but presents itself as an inevitable corollary to the current crisis' single major cause: technological development. Attaining proportions unprecedented and even unimagined in the past, contemporary technological development has established a near autonomous system of social and cultural imperatives, to be called here the technical universe. In this system, which continues to grow around us, politics has been dislocated. The nature of its responsibility to provide answers to social problems has been distorted through a certain confusion between means and ends generated by technological disorientation, which I believe explains in part the incapacity of politics perceived by public opinion. This dislocation of politics could lead to the end of politics—not merely its transformation...."

These fears of a technological *coup-de-grâce* which would put an end to politics are and have been widespread. Thorstein Veblen was voicing them, hopefully, over half a century ago. The arguments in support of these fears, it seems to me, have never been compellingly persuasive, and a recent study by Manfred Stanley, *The Technological Conscience, Survival and Dignity in an Age of Expertise*,³ points expertly in the direction of a politics capable of dealing with life in a technological socie-

ty. Nonetheless, where there is so much smoke there must be some fire and one does not need to add that social and political systems die more often of intellectual and ideological asphyxiation than they do of revolutionary fire.

It would be mistaken, of course, to assume that all liberals enthusiastically and uncritically support the uninterrupted transformation of society by rationalization, science and technology and that all conservatives are in reactionary opposition to the processes of rational and technical change. The lines of division have been confused, virtually from the outset and some political and social liberals have been very fearful of the technological genie they have let out of the bottle while some reactionaries have been positively enthusiastic about the technological revolution their conservative colleagues were busy deploring. The German National Socialists, for example, had very ambivalent attitudes toward technological transformation. While they were enthusiastic consumers of technological gadgetry, especially of improvements of the war machine or the technology of mass communication, they opposed the rationalization of life and thought, were anti-intellectual and were among the founding fathers of an ecological movement based on a nature mysticism. We ought to remember that, in a broad sense, green and brown are both earth colors.

The employment of rational means in the pursuit of irrational ends is not a particularly new phenomenon. Certainly it is not one which is inherent in the development of science and technology. Pseudoscience and mystification often associate themselves with the vocabulary of science and rationality. The cult of expertise, for example, as it is frequently exercised by the economist is an exercise in elitist mystification employed for the purposes of personal and professional self-aggrandizement. All of which is to say that life is messy and that intellectual positions are rarely clear and coherent.

The argument is sometimes made that there is currently a wave of political revol-

sion against technology because technology after having begun the process of social transformation has at last broken down and "failed to deliver the goods."⁴ The energy crisis, the environmental hazards of industrialization, the perennial difficulties encountered by both Eastern and Western economies are cited as harbingers of a general collapse of technological means. More importantly, the flourishing of irrational cults, ideological movements and psychotic life-styles are all evidenced as manifestations of a general human disillusionment with the works of reason.

I have no doubt that there are some intellectuals who reason in this fashion but I am not impressed by their analysis. These second thoughts, ten thousand years after the process of rationalization has begun, seem to me a trifle late. More importantly, I believe they ought to be discounted because they are mistaken. The problems which technology as technology has created are all within the power of technology to rectify. I am not arguing that choices made on the basis of values do not sometimes lead to the misapplication of technology. These failures are not, however, failures of technology but rather human failures to discern and choose the good.

The current crisis in productivity in Western society is the manifestation of a social and cultural crisis rather than a technological crisis. Costs of production are rising and productivity declining because the ethos of a consumption society stands in direct contradiction to accumulation. The problem of productivity is not a technological problem nor are the problems of the environment incident on industrialization and urbanization. The so-called energy crisis is a political rather than a technological problem. To argue that men are disillusioned with technology because "it has failed to deliver the goods," is like arguing that antisepsis ought to be abandoned because medicine cannot assure immortality.

The members of the "Club of Rome" are among those members of the upper middle class who take delight in a world of

diminished expectations, provided, of course, that the reduced standard of living falls on someone other than themselves. If history is any guide, human ingenuity, if unhampered by ideology or government will enlarge man's dominion over nature and increase the abundance which nature yields often with reluctance. Abundance is not a natural condition. Scarcity is the norm and is often deliberately introduced by the processes of nature in order to establish an equilibrium. Unless we are willing to return to a hunting and gathering culture that equilibrium of scarcity can never again be re-established.

Those who reject technology on the basis of diminished expectations, because technology "cannot deliver the goods," are neither conservatives nor classical liberals. Their philosophy is much more closely identified with the decadent contemporary "Liberalism." It is the philosophy for those who are on the cultural and political skids and are, seemingly, glad of it. It is the consoling philosophy of those who have begun the slow descent into social and cultural oblivion.

There is nothing more certain than the fact that the whole of human history has been an unceasing struggle to increase life both quantitatively and qualitatively. All religion seeks to annul death and increase and amplify life. There is not the remotest possibility that mankind, taken as a whole, will abandon this ancient quest. Science, rationality and technique, whatever the death-dealing uses which they sometimes serve, all have as their ultimate purpose the amplification of life. Conservatives and classical liberals alike are agreed philosophically as to the goodness and value of life and the importance of its amplification and enhancement. The groups in contemporary society who stand outside of and opposed to this tradition share a Gnostic revulsion at life and reject the human condition. With these groups conservatives and classical liberals have nothing in common.

A second group, those who have a bucolic nostalgia for an uncomplicated pre-industrial agricultural golden age, also

share very little of the basic philosophy of either classical liberalism or conservatism. Their belief that primitive agriculture produced cultural innocence and unalienated human personalities accords neither with the conservative belief in the fallen or at least selfish and aggressive character of essential human nature, or the classical liberal belief in the primacy of reason. For the classical liberal, human society is *techné* in the original Greek sense of artifice and not the spontaneous production of nature. The notion that cultural and social development ought to be arrested at the stage of primitive agriculture is a part of the myth of the golden age. As such it is in essential conflict with the ontological postulates of either conservatism or classical liberalism. It is only the contemporary liberal with his infinite capacity for make believe who supposes that a diet based on graham flour will improve the condition of both his soul and his culture.

Classical liberals are overwhelmingly supportive of science, technology and the whole process of the progressive rationalization of culture. Human nature and society are seen by the classical liberal as artifice. John Stuart Mill, as in so many other areas, defined the position of classical liberalism with respect to "nature."⁵ In an essay entitled "Nature" which Mill had finished in 1854 but which was later revised and not published until it appeared posthumously in 1874, Mill writes:

The word Nature has two principal meanings: It either denotes the entire system of things, with the aggregate of all their properties, or it denotes things as they would be, apart from human intervention.

In the first of these senses, the doctrine that man ought to follow nature is unmeaning; since man has no power to do anything else but follow nature; all his actions are done through, and in obedience to, some one or many of nature's physical or mental laws.

In the other sense of the term, the doctrine that man ought to follow

nature, or in other words, ought to make the spontaneous course of things the model of his voluntary actions, is equally irrational and immoral.

Irrational, because all human action whatever, consists in altering, and all useful action in improving the spontaneous course of nature:

Immoral, because the course of natural phenomena being replete with everything which when committed by human beings is most worthy of abhorrence, any one who endeavoured in his actions to imitate the natural course of things would be universally seen and acknowledged to be the wickedest of men.

Then Mill added as a devastating passing shot:

The scheme of Nature regarded in its whole extent, cannot have had, for its sole or even principal object, the good of human or other sentient beings. What good it brings them, is mostly the result of their own exertions. Whatsoever, in nature, gives indication of beneficent design, proves this beneficence to be armed only with limited power; and the duty of man is to co-operate with the beneficent powers, not by imitating but by perpetually striving to amend the course of nature—and bringing that part of it over which we can exercise control more nearly into conformity with a high standard of justice and goodness.⁶

Economics as the science, *par excellence*, of rational calculation holds the keystone position in the thought of classical liberals. In spite of the fact that Thomas Carlyle branded economics the "gloomy science" and that Riccardo's writings lent much support to this designation, 19th century classical liberals very generally believed their age to be one of improvement and amelioration. F. A. Hayek⁷ and numerous others following in his footsteps have demonstrated that they were substantially correct and that the attack on industrialism, urbanism and the Manchester school mounted by English literary men in

the 19th century and Fabian propagandists in the 20th century was social and historical misrepresentation. Classical liberals know that rationalization, science and technology mean more and better life and in this they are at one with the enduring human quest.

The fact that conservatives have been generally opposed to technological transformation seems rather puzzling to most Westerners. When, on September 5, 1973, Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote an open letter to the leaders of the Soviet Union,⁸ Western readers were surprised to find in it a full-scale attack on technology, industrialism and urbanization. Solzhenitsyn wrote:⁹

Society must cease to look upon 'progress' as something desirable. 'Eternal progress' is a nonsensical myth. What must be implemented is not a 'steadily expanding economy' but a *zero growth economy* [the emphasis is in the original text]. *Economic growth is not only unnecessary but ruinous.* We must set ourselves the aim not of *increasing* national resources, but merely of *conserving* them. We must renounce, as a matter of urgency, the gigantic scale of modern technology in industry, agriculture and urban development (the cities of today are cancerous tumours). The chief aim of technology will now be to eradicate the lamentable results of previous technologies. The 'Third World,' which has not yet started on the fatal path of Western civilization, can only be saved by 'small-scale technology' which requires an increase, not a reduction, in manual labour, uses the simplest of machinery, and is based purely on local materials.

Of course it might be argued that Solzhenitsyn is not really either a conservative or representative of conservatism in his attack on technology. Perhaps Solzhenitsyn is really only a "man of the Right" as that extraordinary American Whittaker Chambers described himself. The distinction is a fine one and we find Chambers writing in Cold Friday¹⁰

...Hence the diehard Republican position is not merely foredoomed; it is unintelligent, for it does not understand its own logic in terms of history. It still supposes that Senator Taft was a conservative instead of what he actually was: a balky revolutionist who was trying with his bare hands to stop the great wheel of revolution from turning beyond the point which he and his like found comfortable. Actually, the Senator was much clearer about the situation, at least his intentions were surer than his camp followers. That is why he claimed, quite correctly, that he was not a conservative but a liberal.... But he knew well enough that nobody in Cincinnati was conservative in the sense that he was going to get up and shout: 'Farmers, back to horses and the hand plough; smash your tractors and buy no more'....

A conservative would, of course, have advised farmers, as Solzhenitsyn does, to smash their tractors. Whittaker Chambers' sympathies lay in that direction. He was, as he said, an old Narodniki. However, his sense of reality and the historically possible forced him to reject that solution.

It is tempting to turn the remainder of this essay into an anthology of conservative anti-technological quotations and references. The impact on American conservatism has been very sustained and important. From the time of Thomas Jefferson onward there have been fears that technological change, industrialization, urbanism and the growth of wealth would spell the end of republican virtues and institutions.¹¹ More importantly the "Southern Agrarians" who will be accorded by history a central position in the revival of conservatism in America were unremittingly anti-technological. Richard Weaver, a late off-shoot of that fruitful vine enacted in his life as well as his writings his anti-technological vision. Russell Kirk, the founding father of the conservative movement, shares the literary tradition and the anti-technological bias of the Southern Agrarians. It is not hyperbole

to say that the expression of this anti-technological bias has been one of the most persistent themes in the history of American culture.

European conservatism has been even more anti-technological, if that is possible. Klaus Bergmann's dissertation, *Agrarromantik und Grossstadtfeindschaft*,¹² details the extent to which in Germany in the late 19th and 20th century hostility to the technological universe has been the common coin of the conservatives and the right. Some of the major intellectual influences of the 20th century, Max Weber, José Ortega y Gasset, Ernst Jünger, C. S. Lewis, and Jacques Ellul have been either adamantly hostile to technology or have harbored grave reservations concerning its effects.¹³ Friedrich Georg Jünger¹⁴ no less than his brother was opposed to all that technology implied. Martin Heidegger, the most famous German philosopher of the 20th century, felt that technology was a threat to our humanity.

The evidence is clear that among the conservative intellectuals a programmatic hostility to technology is not only a widespread position but an important constituent element in the basic conservative world view. It is equally clear however that in terms of long-range conservative interests and in terms of political feasibility this anti-technological stance is and will become increasingly destructive of the conservative movement.

Whittaker Chambers who, as we have seen, was himself no friend of technology clearly foresaw the political implications of open hostility to technology. This is what he wrote to William Schlamm in 1954:¹⁵

As you know, most factory workers are farmers *manqués*. Moreover, they flocked to the factories in the first place because even the industrial horrors of the nineteenth century seemed preferable to more than ten hours of haying in a shriveling sun, or cows going bad with garget. I worked the hay load last night against the coming rain—by headlights long after dark. I know the farmer's case for the machine and for

the factory. And I know, like the cut of hay-bale cords in my hands, that a conservatism that cannot find room in its folds for these actualities is a conservatism doomed to petulance and dwindling—first unreality and then defeat. Let the conservative fill barley sacks behind the moving combine for even eight hours in a really good sun, and then load them, 100, 150 lb. bags, until midnight, and he will learn more about the realities of rural socialism (and about the realities of conservatism) than he could ever glean from the late, ever to be honored Robert Taft.

Conservatives, if they do not wish to renounce political effectiveness must renounce their hostility to technology. More importantly, they cannot achieve the objective of a peaceful, stable social order unless they support the mastery of the environment which science and technology promise. Indeed without technology it is certain that the elementary need for national defense cannot be met nor elementary promise of jobs, material plenty and cultural satisfaction be fulfilled.

I believe that there are two chief reasons why conservatives fear technology and the movement of rationalization. The first of these is the argument that technological rationalism transforms political and cultural institutions and that its effect is so profound that where it exists the basis for republican institutions and republican virtue can no longer be found. The most extreme statement of this idea, of course, is the novel, *Brave New World*, by Aldous Huxley. The machine is spoken of as exercising a "tyranny" over men and their institutions. It is argued that the forms of bureaucratic administration, machine production and the lifestyles necessary to the successful functioning of industrial society are inimical to the free-development and exercise of man's potentialities, move in a direction contrary to the development of the virtues necessary for republican life and destroy the institutional forms necessary for a free society. The argument is that technology necessitates and always

results in more and bigger government. *The Greening of America* may have been far from the intellectual world of most conservatives and yet conservative attitudes had, at bottom, more in common with Charles Reich than they did with the attitudes of F. A. von Hayek.

Karl August von Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism*, linking as it does the development of "hydraulic civilization" dependent upon elaborate techniques of irrigation, and oriental despotism, is an analysis of an early cultural stage of this association of technique and despotism. Does it follow that the introduction of technology always limits freedom or that "the unanticipated consequences of rational action" always entail a dehumanizing component?

All choice, of course, either inhibits or limits later choice and in this respect technology is no different from the most arbitrary and irrational choices conceivable. Indeed, in the predictability of its consequences it permits a greater exercise of freedom than does irrational choice. Indeed, the consequences of technology are broadly liberating rather than necessitating. No doubt it is possible to structure the technological universe in such a way as to limit freedom and foster tyranny. It is also possible to structure the technological universe in such a way as to maximize freedom and encourage the exercise of choice. Technology does not discourage the pursuit of value.

There is a second factor, however, which almost invariably plays a role in the conservative opposition to technology, rationalization and science. Conservatives believe that technology transforms human nature. This notion I need not remind you plays a decisive role in the formulation of the Marxist system. By revolutionizing man's tools one transforms the conditions of man's existence and ultimately man's nature. In the general conservative opposition to revolution conservatives tend to oppose, above all, those changes in the circumstances of the human condition which they believe would produce a radical alteration in human behavior. They view technological transformation and social ra-

tionalization as dissolving the bonds of society and eroding traditional forms and institutions. For conservative thinkers the machine plays no less a role in the dissemination of revolution than it does for Marxist theoreticians.

When we realize that fear of revolution is the basic cause of the conservative hostility to technology, we have put our finger on a very basic difference between classical liberalism and conservatism. This fear of revolution accounts, moreover, for the basic difference in attitude on the part of most conservatives in contrast to classical liberals with respect to liberty.

It is interesting to note that, lacking any anthropology or basic analysis of human nature, classical liberals are unwilling to talk about the "transformation of human essence" by technology and rationalization. Traditionally, classical liberals have been tempted by Comtean positivism though few of them have been willing to move in so basically a metaphysical direction. As a consequence classical liberals have viewed technology as ameliorative rather than transforming. Conservatives, however, have always had a thoroughgoing commitment to metaphysics and for them the consequences of technological change have been disintegrative in human society and destructive of human nature.

If technology has, as most Conservative theorists believe, the power to transform human nature, then no accommodation such as that suggested by Whittaker Chambers, even on the basis of political pragmatism, is possible. It is just possible, however, that most conservatives are wrong concerning the ability of technology to transform man's basic institutions and change his "human nature." The belief by conservatives in the total transforming power of technology is the consequence of their having forgotten the most basic postulate of the conservative position. That postulate is the belief in the fixed and unalterable character of human nature and the consequent permanent character of the human institutions within which man seeks to fulfill that nature. The conservative believes, above all else, that there

is a basic quiddity to human nature which lies beyond the possibility of transformation. This human essence cannot be touched by cultural change or the technological transformation of the circumstances of human existence. Those who mistake the "accidents" of human existence for its "essence" and seek to preserve those time-conditioned accidents are traditionalists rather than conservatives. It is, of course, possible to attempt to tinker with the givens of human nature and to reorder the corresponding human institutions. These efforts, conservatives believe, on the basis of historical experience, always end in failure and men always return to an order in their political and social lives which reflects the realities of their natures.

This position was at the heart of Benjamin Disraeli's politics. When he confronted the Reform Act of 1867 he was quite willing to adopt a position which would lead to the radical democratization of English society even though Liberals stood aghast at such a policy and accused Disraeli of adventurism and a lack of principle.¹⁶ Disraeli, secure in his belief about the fixed character of human nature and the corresponding character of political institutions necessary to fulfill the needs of

that nature, was able to sacrifice the "accidents" of political arrangements. What appeared at the superficial level to be an unprincipled political pragmatism was, in fact, a belief in the unalterable character of the human condition.

It is on this basis, I believe, that Conservatives need not fear technology. I call on them to renounce their technological determinism and their obscurantist traditionalism. That position can lead only to political ineffectuality and a petrified irrelevance. Their followers will slowly slip away to the camp of those other technological determinists, the Marxists, who promise so much more. It is on the basis of an openness to technical and cultural change where that change is congruent with the fixities of human nature that some permanent alliance with classical liberalism is possible. The liberal's love of freedom and commitment to rationality, science and technology is an important corrective to the conservative's temptation to a mindless traditionalism. The conservative belief in a permanent human nature and enduring human institutions beyond the reach of "improvement" is an important, even indispensable compliment to the classical liberal's optimistic expectations.

¹A good brief, though not comprehensive, listing of the literature is to be found in "Technology: The Hidden Variable" by Victor Ferkiss in *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 3, July 1980, pp. 349-387.

²David C. Menninger, "Politics and Technology" in *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 1, January 1980, pp. 74-5.

³Manfred Stanley, *The Technological Conscience, Survival and Dignity in an Age of Expertise* (New York, The Free Press, 1978).

⁴Ferkiss, "Technology: The Hidden Variable," p. 351.

⁵With respect to Mill's views, see Andrew Griffin, "The Interior Garden and John Stuart Mill" in V. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson, eds., *Nature and the Victorian* (Berkeley, The University of California Press, 1977), pp. 171-186.

⁶John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, eds. F. E. L. Priestly, et al. (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1969), Vol. 10, pp. 401-2.

⁷F. A. Hayek, ed., *Capitalism and the Historians* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1954), Herbert L. Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine, The Literary Response to Technology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1968).

⁸Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Letter to Soviet Leaders* (Glasgow: Collins/Harvill, 1974). *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹Whittaker Chambers, *Cold Friday*, edited and with an Introduction by Duncan Norton-Taylor (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 228.

¹⁰John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine, Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1976).

¹¹Klaus Bergmann, *Agrarromantik und Grossstadtfeindschaft*, Marburger Abhandlungen zur Politischen Wissenschaft, Vol. 20 (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1970).

¹²Carl Mitcham and Robert Mackey, eds., *Philosophy and Technology, Readings in the philosophical problems of technology* (New York: The Free Press, 1972).

¹³Friedrich Georg Jünger, *The Failure of Technology*, translated by F. D. Wieck (Hinsdale, Ill.: Regnery, 1949).

¹⁴Whittaker Chambers, *Cold Friday*, pp. 234-5.

¹⁵For a most illuminating discussion of this contrast between liberal politics and conservative radicalism, see: Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Politics and Ideology: The Reform Act of 1867" in *Victorian Minds* (New York: Knopf, 1968), pp. 333-392.