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The Technological Basis of Stupidity

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A major cultural factor in determining the amount and nature of work performed a society is the level and type of technology applied to the exploitation of its natural resources. Basically, technology is that aspect of culture which encompasses the tools as well as the techniques people use in meeting their material needs.[1] It functions through time in its interrelations to other aspects of society so its significance must be appreciated as means to maladapt a society not only to its natural environment but to itself as well[2] to the point of being tyrannically dehumanizing.[3]

Regardless of the level of sophistication of its technology, when a group outstrips the carrying capacity of its environment, starvation, disease and/or war will follow. This is a basic principle of life, and technology cannot alter it. Sophisticated devices and methods may expand the capacity of the environment to sustain a certain way of life, but when these new limits are exceeded, the same predictable result is inevitable but worse. In fact, without some guiding sense of the long-term impact of technoillogical exploitation of natural resources, technology serves only to build up a culture to a bigger, neurotic paradoxically induced crash when it comes.

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The Technological Basis of Stupidity

James F. Welles, Ph.D.

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Just at the start of the Industrial Revolution, Thomas Malthus articulated the principle that starvation, disease and war always will be the limiting factors on the growth of human populations.[4] It is a sad commentary on humanity that, although technological development has proceeded apace since that time, little in the last two centuries indicates that our political leaders are aware of the long- term dangers inherent in their shortsighted policies. We seem unable to reconcile the facts that we are both slaves to our cultural world as well as creatures of nature.

The chronic starvation in Ethiopia is a tragic example of the stupidity a simple culture can impose upon itself. There, agricultural techniques which sufficed for ages became ineffective as the natural and political environments changed. The problems of coping with extensive droughts were compounded by the contrived polices of the government which confounded the teachings of one noted economist, refuted those of another and confirmed those of a third. Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam dealt with the crisis with policies based on his own distortion of Marxist ideology[5]—policies which proved to be at least as maladaptive as the traditional means for providing food where these were applied. Sad to say, some of the best agricultural land in the country was used to produce livestock feed for export to Europe[6], thus refuting Adam Smith's notion that profit makers improve their society in general.[7] Sadder to say, no one in a position of authority did anything to promote birth control as a long-term policy for preventing future famines, so, as Thomas Malthus averred, famine acted as a passive form of birth control[8]–this matter being too important to be dealt with logically by intelligent, informed leaders.[a]

Although the commitment of any civilization to its way of life may be irrational, it may also be adjudged as efficient if the same society provides the standard for measuring its mythological success. The hidden pitfall is not what that standard may be but what it is not—not what it includes but what it omits. In technologically advanced societies, the commission of machines to help people is clearly desirable, but the omission of people from the calculations of computer programmers is indicative of a cultured failure to perceive that people are not here to help machines. The social impact of technology and scientific ideology is commonly treated as an incidental spin-off from numerous, specific projects developed by single-minded engineers. However, the parts do not add up to a whole; they add up to a lot of disjointed parts.

The material success of a technologically oriented society may impress those who revel in quantified analysis, but human and spiritual values have been sacrificed to the point that most of us cease even to wonder if life has any meaning beyond our self-constructed, self-destructive world. Today's overdeveloped nations perceive themselves more as successfully prospering and thriving in their own technological present than in the process of withering and dying commercially in a global economy in which the internet reigns extreme. This perception is justified partly because cybertechnology exaggerates personal inequalities/advantages which promote the profitable application of mathematics to engineering and science.[9]

However profitable such applications are, they leave us with the undeniable fact that *we are committed to an unsustainable life style*.[10] We have until about 2060 to perfect fusion[b] and solar technologies or come up with some other energy source to sustain our voracious, self-centered civilization. Our mentality toward mother earth was always shaped by how we can get how much from it. Of all the classical political economists, Malthus alone consider the supply side–that the "How much" was finite.[11]

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a. President Mengistu resigned in May, 1991, but the famine predicted when this was written in 1985 occurred in 2000–and again in 2011 and 20??.

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Notes

1. Braudel, F. 1981. *The Structures of Everyday Life.* Harper & Row; New York. 334.
2. Hammond, P. 1978. *An Introduction to Cultural and Social Anthropology.* 2nd ed. Macmillan; New York. 34.
3. Erickson, E. 1974. *Dimensions of a New Identity: The 1973 Jefferson Lectures in the Humanities.* Norton; New York. 2; 100-101.
4. Malthus, T. 1798. *An Essay on the Principle of Population.*
5. *New York Times* (Large Type Weekly). Sept. 24, 1984. 4.
6. Rifkin, J. *The European Dream*. Penguin; New York. 2004. 367.
7. Smith, A. *Inquiry into the Nature and Cause of the Wealth of Nations.* Two volumes. London. 1776. By socking their well-gotten gains into Swiss bank accounts, for example.
8. Malthus. *op. cit.*
9. Fukuyama, F. *Political Order and Political Decay*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; New York. 2014. 447
10. Mortimer, I. *Millennium.* Pegasus; NY. 2016. 321.
11. *Ibid.* 326.

b. The drawback to nuclear fusion is that it produces plutonium 238–one of the most toxic materials known–by the ton. Solar is clean and essentially limited only by the areas exposed to the sun. We have enough coal to last us into the 23rd century but Newton predicted the end of the world in 2060, so I will stick with him. JFW. ☹

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