



THE CITIZEN'S VOICE: TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLITICS AND LITERATURE

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In Quest of Authenticity

In *The Meaning of the Twentieth Century*, published in 1964, economist Kenneth Boulding spelled out the parameters of the great transition undergone by the human race in the twentieth century. He compared its power and intensity to the transition from pre-civilized to civilized societies five to ten thousand years ago. The first transition was based on agriculture; it was not until people settled down and began to cultivate crops and domesticate animals that a surplus of food developed which could sustain the kings, priests, soldiers, and artisans of urban civilization. The second transition is based on technology. While the first transition gave rise to the differences between cultures, Boulding claims, the technological transition leads to uniformity because its techniques are much less bound either to geography or to past culture than were the techniques of the past.¹

The uniformity brought about by modern technology became a major theme in such writings as John Kenneth Galbraith's above-mentioned *The New Industrial State*, Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society*, and Alvin

Toffler's *Future Shock*. Galbraith explained the imperatives of technology in the industrial process, especially the need for certainty, rationality, and long-range planning, and the rise of a technocratic class in modern industrial states committed to these values.² Ellul lamented the subordination of all social and cultural systems to technology, claiming that "when technique enters into every area of life, including the human, it ceases to be external to man and becomes his very substance."³ And Toffler stressed the difficulty that individuals and social systems had in progressing with technology.⁴

Technology – the application of scientific means to industrial use – has always led to social, economic, and cultural change. The introduction of a tractor into a village that previously had no tractors changes property relations, family structures, the division of labor, economic expectations, demands for education, etc. What characterized twentieth-century technology, however, was its absolute effect; the changes brought about by technology were fast, interrelated, and overwhelming. The atomic bomb, antibiotics, the space program, radio, television, the car, the airplane, the pill, the personal computer, and many other products of technology changed all spheres of life and nowhere could their effects be avoided. So much so, that the technological revolution was seen as inevitable.

Although technology supposedly developed to benefit humankind, its wide-ranging effects raised deep concern. Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times* reflected the fear of many over the subordination of the individual to the machine. The age-old question "who governs?" was given new urgency. Once it was perceived that genetic engineering, for instance, would provide humanity with the means to change human qualities, the problem of who would be in charge of that process became more crucial than ever before. Democracy had a ready-made answer – it put its faith in the elect – but citizens of democracies were well aware that elected officials lacked the necessary expertise to follow complex processes like genetic engineering. And nobody was particularly eager to see those who did have the expertise – scientists – take control and serve as a "new priesthood."⁵

Brave New World is one of the main expressions of the fear of technology and its effects. Huxley, born in 1884 to a family of well-known scientists, hoped to become a medical doctor, but due to his poor eyesight had to give it up and became an essayist and novelist. *Brave New World*'s success may be partly attributed to the year of its publication: 1932. Like many others,

Huxley feared the rising force of fascism and described the future world as one of absolute control by the state over its citizens made possible by the power of the sciences, especially the life and behavioral sciences, to condition individuals into a state of total submission. In the world of the 1930s, which feared fascism and suspected science and technology, the book soon became a classic, side by side with *Frankenstein*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and similar fiction.

One of the greatest fears of technology concerns its destruction of authentic life. "Authenticity" refers to a way of life that follows its presumed nature. Political theorists have debated for centuries what constitutes the "state of nature," but the very quest for it meant that cultural constructs were believed to have a natural base whose recognition is crucial to the normative ordering of these constructs, notably the state. In social contract theory, for instance, the development of the political state is explained by the natural conditions from which it emerged, and it is expected to behave in accordance with norms implied by these conditions. The technological revolution, however, was seen as bringing about new physical and cultural constructs that contradicted nature, e.g., a human habitat without fresh air or a state armed with weapons of mass destruction that denies its citizens their natural right, which lies at the core of social contract theory, to live in peace and safety.

Although Huxley's characters are insufficiently developed, John the Savage carries an important message: he represents an authentic existence in nature. *Brave New World* begins with a visit by a group of students to a hatchery and conditioning center in which they observe the artificial fertilizing and psychological conditioning of human beings. The center is located in a setting devoid of sunlight, seasonal change, or any other natural phenomena:

The enormous room on the ground floor faced towards the north. Cold for all the summer beyond the panes, for all the tropical heat of the room itself, a harsh thin light glared through the windows, hungrily seeking some draped lay figure, some pallid shape of academic gooseflesh, but finding only the glass and nickel and bleakly shining porcelain of a laboratory.⁶

Literature, art, and folklore have long stressed the separation of urban life from nature, but only the technological revolution of the twentieth century has provided substitutes, such as this laboratory, in which nature is abandoned altogether. The laboratory workers are white, their hands gloved with a pale corpse-colored rubber, and the light is “frozen, dead, a ghost”⁷ This is not the assembly line of the industrial revolution; it is a preview of the atomic shelters and space colonies that separate human beings from flowers, trees, and other natural phenomena. In the brave new world, babies are conditioned to hate books and roses. Primroses and landscapes have one grave defect: they are gratuitous, as a love of nature keeps no factories busy. In the brave new world, the love of nature is abolished.

In a forward added to *Brave New World* in 1946, the author regretted the strict dichotomy he had suggested a decade earlier between nature and technological civilization, but the book provides only two alternatives: “an insane life in Utopia, or the life of a primitive in an Indian village.”⁸ Contrary to the romantic view of nature advanced by thinkers like Rousseau, here the choice between nature and culture is not an easy one. In contrast to the inhabitants of utopia, John the Savage lives an authentic life but the Indian reserve is by no means a romantic place: “The place was queer, so was the music, so were the clothes and the goiters and the skin diseases and the old people.”⁹ Yet this natural setting provides an alternative to the technological civilization gone astray. It shatters this civilization’s “commonplaces of progressive hopes for mankind”¹⁰ and exposes “the irony inherent in the absolute success of a scientific-sociological vision.”¹¹

Huxley realizes that most humans are quite unwilling to tolerate the conditions on the Indian reserve and therefore will be prepared to sign a pact with the technological devil. History has been filled with insecurity, poverty, and pain while technology promises a world devoid of them. Who wouldn’t be willing to give up his home and family, Huxley ironically asks, for a brave new world of laboratories, microscopes, and polished tubes in which babies are cloned:

Home, home – a few small rooms, stiflingly overinhabited by a man, by a periodically teeming woman, by a rabble of boys and girls of all ages. No air, no space; an understerilized prison; darkness, disease, and smells ... a rabbit hole, a midden, hot

with the frictions of tightly packed life, reeking with emotion. What suffocating intimacies, what dangerous, insane, obscene relationships between the members of the family group!¹²

The irony seems to be directed mainly at Freudianism in which human faults are blamed on family life. Since Freud, the world has been filled with parents causing suffering, abuse, and sublimation, all of which are abolished by behavioral manipulation in utopia. So is art, literature, independent thought, moral choice, even religion. The technological civilization is a pagan one because religion stems from human suffering while technology supposedly overcomes it and hence nullifies the belief in God.

But the price of technology is the abandonment of authenticity. John the Savage remains authentic because he maintains his distance from the technological civilization. He prefers internal restraints to external conditioning, he prays and is close to God, he gives up the products of the consumer society and feels grateful for the landscape outside the city's skyscrapers. He tries to escape to an enclave where nature hasn't yet been destroyed. He enjoys "the woods, the open stretches of heather and yellow gorse, the clumps of Scotch firs, the shining ponds with their overhanging birch trees, their water lilies, their beds of rushes ..." ¹³ but soon realizes that this vision is subdued in a technological world. As he attempts to "escape further contamination by the filth of civilized life," ¹⁴ he is confronted by the press corps, film makers, tourists, and other representatives of the new industrial state who are staring, laughing, clicking their cameras, throwing peanuts, and leaving nothing to its genuine and authentic self.

The agents of the technological civilization do not leave room for individual liberty and self-control over one's environment. *Brave New World* is a statement about the price paid by humanity as it advances – willingly – towards technological solutions to human problems. Although the brave new world resembles the assembly line of the nineteenth century more than the industrial process of the 1930s (nuclear energy, for example, is not even mentioned), it provides a frame of reference for individuals who participate in the technological project yet realize the Faustian pact it involves, for technology implies the loss of authenticity.

Technology also implies the loss of democratic order. According to Huxley, it does not really matter whether technology is used by a fascist,

communist, or liberal regime; the power to clone and condition human beings is equally frightening when it is given to an authoritarian elite or to some unidentified group. In this novel, national boundaries are broken, which leaves the impression that the technological process is controlled by an international elite whose motives and ideology remain unclear.

The students visiting the hatchery are confronted by Mustapha Mond, one of the world's ten controllers, who articulates the ideology of the brave new world. He conceives technology to be the central force in a civilization whose main value is the stability of the production process. Industrialization requires social stability that allows a steady flow of workers for the production process. Individuals have to be conditioned to fulfill their roles in that process, and the process must be tightly controlled so as to avoid a population explosion that would cause massive deaths once industry would not be able to feed the masses. Here is Mond speaking in six hundred years:

The machine turns, turns and must keep on turning – for ever. It is death if it stands still. A thousand millions scabbled the crust of the earth. The wheels began to turn. In a hundred and fifty years there were two thousand millions. Stop all the wheels. In a hundred and fifty weeks there are once more only a thousand millions; a thousand thousand thousand men and women have starved to death.

Wheels must turn steadily, but cannot turn untended. There must be men to tend them, men as steady as the wheels upon their axles, sane men, obedient men, stable in contentment.¹⁵

The nature of the ruling elite remains unclear but not its inhuman character. It has abandoned those behaviors that characterized individuals in the past, such as care for the young and elderly:

Crying: My baby, my mother, my only, only love; groaning: My sin, my terrible God; screaming with pain, muttering with fever, bemoaning old age and poverty – how can they tend the wheels?¹⁶

The brave new world is rational, well-organized (or rather over-organized) and lacks political choice. The ruling elites become unpredictable because they no longer rely merely on traditional means of power-acquisition but rather on scientific knowledge. The demise of brute force as the source of power becomes apparent in a series of fragments: "Government's an affair of sitting, not hitting. You rule with the brains and the buttocks, never with the fists."¹⁷ The world controllers of the emerging future realize that force is no good in comparison to slower but infinitely surer methods such as neo-Pavlovian conditioning. This transforms government from a political institution born in force and thus overthrown by force if necessary to a faceless creature that lasts forever. The government is totalitarian; it includes such institutions as bureaus of propaganda, a college of emotional engineering, press offices, and research laboratories, all of which assure the government's eternity.

The government intervenes in the most intimate processes of life. It controls no less than hormone injection, artificial dissemination, abortion, natural birth, breast-feeding, and similar matters mainly concerning the woman's body. This is frightening not only because of the brutality involved but because of the wide reach of the government. It is not only in charge of adapting humans to their industrial roles but also intervenes in the natural process of giving birth. As Huxley explains in a later essay:

In the Brave New World of my fable socially desirable behaviour was ensured by a double process of genetic manipulation and post-natal conditioning. Babies were cultivated in bottles and a high degree of uniformity in the human product was assured by using ova from a limited number of mothers and by treating each ovum in such a way that it would split and split again, producing identical twins in batches of a hundred or more. In this way it was possible to produce standardized machine-minders for standardized machines.¹⁸

In that essay, Huxley admitted that the genetic standardization of individuals was still beyond human reach, but he warned that big government and big business already possessed, or were expected to possess soon, techniques that would allow mind manipulation. Lacking the ability to impose genetic uniformity upon embryos, he believed, the rulers of tomorrow's

overpopulated and over-organized world would try to impose social and cultural uniformity upon adults and their children. If this kind of tyranny is to be avoided, he contended, we must begin without delay to educate ourselves and our children for freedom and self-government.

What chance is there to educate the masses participating in the technological project to recognize its dangers and fight against them? This task is made rather hard by the mass drugging of the population in the technological age. In an essay titled "Chemical Persuasion," Huxley explained the wide use of a drug named Soma in his utopia:

In the *Brave New World* the Soma habit was not a private vice; it was a political institution, it was the very essence of the Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. But this most precious of the subjects' inalienable privileges was at the same time one of the most powerful instruments of rule in the dictator's armoury. The systematic drugging of individuals for the benefit of the State (and incidentally, of course, for their delight) was a main plank in the policy of the World Controllers.¹⁹

Technology makes it possible for the masses to engage in hedonism; a much larger percentage of the population in the twentieth century was offered the means to enjoy the pleasures previously reserved for the nobility. The hedonistic culture, however, is disturbing to Huxley because hedonism is inconsistent with freedom. Like drug addicts, individuals consume the products and images of a society that promises happiness but allows a political elite to manipulate the population.

The problem of drugs, television, free sex, and other means to entertain whole populations to death is articulated in *Brave New World* by Bernard Marx. Marx is deformed as a result of alcohol mixed in his blood and hence conscious of the traditional values lost in the excessive pursuit of happiness. As a result of his deformity, he does not respond properly to his conditioning in the brave new world and thus objects to leisure activities conducted in public. He invites "Lenina," who is well adjusted to the new world, to take a walk with him for a couple of hours and talk, but she fails to understand the value of talking and prefers to fly, in jet-set fashion, to Amsterdam to join a crowd watching the "Semi-Demi Finals of the Women's Heavyweight

Wrestling Championship.” Bernard’s reaction: “I’d rather be myself . . . myself and nasty. Not somebody else, however jolly.”²⁰ In other words, happiness is identified here with the loss of one’s self-identity. Lenina repeats clichés she was conditioned to absorb in her sleep, which make her appreciate the superficial joy provided by drugs and other means of gaining pleasure.

The endless pursuit of pleasures in modern industrial states is one of the reasons for the loss of authenticity. The deformed Bernard is capable of appreciating nature while Lenina uses electronic devices to hide from it. When Bernard pays attention to the rushing emptiness of the night, the black foam-flecked water, the pale face of the moon and the hastening clouds she prefers to turn on the radio. The political implications are clear. Bernard’s capacity to appreciate nature is associated with individualism as opposed to becoming a cell in the social body. Lenina’s enslavement to technology, on the other hand, is unconscious and appears under a pretence of freedom:

‘Don’t you wish you were free, Lenina?’

‘I don’t know what you mean. I am free. Free to have the most wonderful time. Everybody is happy nowadays.’

He laughed, ‘Yes. Everybody’s happy nowadays. We begin giving the children that at five. But wouldn’t you like to be free to be happy in some other way, Lenina? In your own way, for example; not in everybody else’s way.’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ She repeated.²¹

Lenina’s pursuit of pleasure, which Huxley associates with American society, seems to Bernard Marx a childish, unbalanced approach to life. But the ruling elite discourages a more mature approach because of the political advantages it gains when the population indulges in leisure activities. This is one of the strong meeting points between fascist and democratic regimes; the latter follows the former in the use of means that drug the masses. The “Semi-Demi Finals of the Women’s Heavyweight Wrestling Championship” do not differ greatly from the fascist rallies and parades of the 1930s. In both cases, the population’s attention is diverted from personal problems to public pleasures. Consider the singing and dancing in the brave new world as a means of enhancing solidarity in fascist fashion:

Round they went, a circular procession of dancers, each with hands on the hips of the dancer preceding, round and round, shouting in unison, stamping to the rhythm of the music with their feet, beating it, beating it out with hands on the buttocks in front; twelve pairs of hands beating as one; twelve buttocks slabbily resounding.²²

This novel's contribution to the civil society model, then, lies in its emphasis on authenticity. The political demands for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, conceived as natural rights, are replaced by the horrors of a technological society controlled by anonymous forces. The contribution is somewhat limited as a result of the novel's strict polarization between the life in a brave new world made of glass and aluminum structures vs. the life of John the Savage which involves a total return to nature. It is limited because the new industrial state has shown greater consciousness about natural and ecological considerations than Huxley expected, especially after the student revolts of the 1960s. Huxley was versed in the scientific literature of his time but failed to understand the various options open to the modern industrial state; *Brave New World* always remained a statement by those fearing it in an abstract sense.²³

The book expresses the ideology of a declining British aristocracy feeling threatened by technological development. For instance, Huxley did not think beyond the English class system. It is unclear why the industrial state six hundred years into the future should resemble that system in its encouragement of class-consciousness among children or why the differentiation between classes would be part of the industrial process of the future. At one point, a classless society is mentioned when Huxley tells of an experiment in future Cyprus in which all agricultural and industrial functions were left to one class. The results "fulfilled all the theoretical predictions,"²⁴ namely, that the system wouldn't work because all the people detailed to a shift at low-grade work were constantly intriguing to obtain high-grade jobs, and all the people with high-grade jobs were counter-intriguing at all costs to stay where they were.

This, of course, is a prediction based not on essential conditions of the new industrial state but on the novelist's own prejudices. The distinction between "high-grade" and "low-grade" jobs may easily blur in the future, as

shown in many corporations. Huxley was obviously influenced by scientific management theories intended to increase the productivity of industrial workers. But in 1932, these theories were no longer the last word in the field, and theories stressing the importance of human relations in the industrial process, intended to reduce the frustration and alienation of “low grade” workers, were already prevalent.

Huxley issued a warning about the dangers awaiting us once science and technology are controlled by dark forces. The atrocious use of science and technology in World War II has validated these warnings and turned Huxley into a prophet of doom. It must be recalled however, that the Allies in winning World War II also used science and technology. As destructive as technologies can be, they can also be used for the construction of a better world. A utopia looking six hundred years into the future cannot assume a one-dimensional path. Just as the modern industrial state can censor books and flowers, it can provide the masses with access to books and the leisure time to read them. In *Brave New World*, children are ugly, uniform, conditioned creatures but modern science and technology have liberated many children from slavery, provided them with open education, and, without sending them to an Indian reserve, have constructed – through the distribution of computers, for example – a private sphere that allows them to develop as free and enlightened individuals.

In one fragment the author reveals his main objection to the modern industrial state; he objects to its effectiveness. The essence of liberalism is defined as the right to be ineffective:

Sleep teaching was actually prohibited in England. There was something called liberalism. Parliament, if you know what that was, passed a law against it. The records survive. Speeches about liberty of the subject. Liberty to be inefficient and miserable. Freedom to be a round peg in a square hole.²⁵

As the twentieth century came to a close, however, it was not the efficiency of the new industrial state that was worrisome but its inefficiency; flaws of the kind discussed by Kafka threatened to turn it into a nightmare. The human ability to uncover the genetic code or to engineer behavior became less perturbing than such occurrences as the transplant of organs to a teenager

who died because the blood type of the donor had not been properly checked. Such apparently small disruptions in the system threatened the entire technological project because they exposed the discrepancy between the ambitions of the human race and its actual capabilities. The organizational order within which governments, militaries, industries, hospitals, schools, police departments, and other institutions operated did not adjust to the demands of complex technological projects. Attempts to reorganize in accordance with these demands, e.g., the establishment of NASA in the late 1950s or the introduction of rational planning, programming, budgeting processes in the U.S. Department of Defense in the 1960s were presented as success stories until the truth about human rivalries, character deficiencies, or what Barabara Tuchman saw as sheer folly became apparent.²⁶

Moreover, a whole culture of cover-up developed, in which political malfunction, military failures, medical negligence, environmental destruction, leaks in nuclear reactors, and other disasters were either hidden from the public eye or blurred when revealed. The cover-up culture that developed in all spheres of the modern industrial state threatened the entire industrial project because it stood in contrast to the norms of sincerity, transparency, and information-sharing that made the project possible in the first place. Political leaders and industrial managers could perhaps be expected to engage in cover-ups, especially after the Watergate affair, which revealed the magnitude of the phenomenon, but doctors, engineers, programmers, and other professionals, threatened by just and unjust accusations for their role in the execution of flawed technological ventures, were also found very often to transform their professional mode of thinking into a public relations orientation. The joke that professionals no longer make a move without a lawyer became reality.

Rather than turning into the hedonistic monster foreseen by Huxley, the United States at the end of the twentieth century resembled more a clumsy Middle Ages knight. American scholars have celebrated their country's victory in the Cold War against the Soviet Union by the supremacy of American technology – especially by the success of President Ronald Reagan's ambitious "Star Wars" program – and were partly right. In contrast to the corrupt Soviet Union, the U.S. succeeded in turning the electric circuit, the semiconductor, the microchip, and other inventions into products of political and military might without impoverishing society. At the end

of the twentieth century, many Americans and other Westerners enjoyed warm houses, cheap automobiles, reasonable air-travel, color TVs, banking machines, personal computers, and other products of technology. The drive to export these products to consumers all over the world brought about the notion of “globalization,” referring among other things to world hegemony of American technology.

The success story of American technology had, however, three loopholes. First, at the end of the century it became harder and harder to ignore the fact that disasters, from the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 to the destruction of the Challenger space shuttle in 1986, are not just “accidents” but an imminent part of life in a world dependent on technology. Second, it became clear that technological supremacy is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of national success. American foreign and security policy, highly dependent on technology, was often unsuccessful, as demonstrated in the failure to win the Vietnam War, the collapse of operation “Eagle Claw” intended to rescue American hostages from Iran in 1979, or the failure of American Patriot missiles to shoot down even one Iraqi Scud during the Gulf War of 1991. And third, it became more and more obvious that technology entails dangerous social side effects. Wade Rowland summarizes this point as follows:

The negative side to all this “progress” is too well known to bear much discussion: the depredations of the automobile, for instance, are many and well understood. The daily toll in traffic fatalities alone would have stunned the most jaded nineteenth-century industrialist. Television’s damage to the social fabric seems indisputable, if unquantifiable. That the social costs of modern technologies have been, on occasion, great, is beyond argument.²⁷

Thus, as the twentieth century came to a close, neither the U.S. nor any other country had to worry about over-effectiveness. The liberty to be inefficient and miserable sought by Huxley was hardly endangered, and there was plenty of freedom “to be a round peg in a square hole.” The main danger to liberty, as demonstrated on September 11, 2001, came not from the champions of technology but from fundamentalist forces skilled in using the products of technology to weaken Western democracies. On September 11, Huxley’s

challenge to maintain authenticity within the confines of the modern industrial state paled in comparison to the new challenge faced by the world's democracies to defend themselves against those who, in the name of an anti-technological ideology, seemed determined to destroy civility altogether.