

## **The question concerning technology today**

*Gianni Vattimo*

Is there a “question concerning technology today”? Heidegger has often repeated that the essence of technology is nothing technical. Leaving aside the multiple meanings this sentence has acquired in his thought, one may say that it was surely a prophetic sentence. That’s why it is important, in the title of this paper, to emphasize the clause “today.” As a matter of fact, we can say that our experience of technology has developed more and more in the direction of the progressive discovery of the truth of Heidegger’s sentence: there is no technical question on technology: i.e. we cannot say that the question concerning technology—supposed that we may define it—could be solved by a technological move, for instance a new discovery, a new application of what we know, etc. Very simply, the question

concerning technology is a metaphysical, or an ontological question. It has to do with the meaning of technology in our existence and in relation to what we call Being, truth, value. And the ontological, or existential, meaning of the question concerning technology is exactly the question as it appears to us today. Even the very notion of something called technology was unthinkable in previous epochs: in Aristotle's, as you may remember, *techne* was one of the dianoetic virtues, like phronesis (prudence), intellect (nous) etc.: *techne* was the ability of producing an object, an *ergon*, in the material world—also a work of art was a “technical” product. Probably, not even the word technology is to be found in the vocabulary of Aristotle. At the very end, what we call today the question concerning technology is more or less the story of the transformation of this very word: how did it happen that today we speak still of technique, of technics and technicity, but basically the “question” is for us “technology”?

I am not engaging in a pure word game, believe me. Let's say: technique became technology when *techne* lost its qualification as a virtue, a capacity of man as such, developing instead into a global system of productive connections, what Heidegger calls the *Gestell*, the complex of the production, exploitation of resources, etc. In which sense does this global machinery involve a “question”? Again and again, the question does not allow itself to be reduced to a simple “question,” as if we were looking for a simple answer. We don't ask what is technology, looking for a definition, an essence. What I'm suggesting is

not simply that technique has become technology when the system of techno-scientific machinery has appeared explicitly in the form of an integrated “system.” But, more than that, I want to call the attention to the fact that the very question concerning technology has become urgent, and even simply possible, when technology has become an integrated system. There was no question concerning technology when the different techniques progressively developed by man were just different devices in order to facilitate this or that aspect of existence, by producing objects or modifications in the material world. Medicine, for instance, has always been a technique, but only recently it has become part of technology. The meaning of this way of interpreting Heidegger’s sentence on “*Die Technik*” is rather simple: what constitutes the question concerning technology is not a problem related to the fact that man invents and develops instruments and manners of realizing useful objects or different conditions of his/her life; what makes technology become a question for us today is its character as an integrated system. In relation to this question, the usual answers we find in the current culture—technique is not good or bad in itself, this depends only from the use one makes of it, etc.—sound generally frivolous and obviously unsatisfying. They don’t offer any real answer: why should we ask the question of technology if this was so simple? The reason is that technology as an integrated system seems to escape exactly to all evaluations, having become a sort of autonomous world—it is even difficult to find a name for it: body, connection, machinery... As you

may remember, Heidegger used the word *Gestell*, based on the root *stellen*, put, pose, dispose, and on the prefix *Ge*, indicating the complex of (*Ge-Birg*: a chain of mountains etc.). What constitutes the “question” is the *Ge-*, as it were: as far as it develops into a complex of instruments totally integrated with one another, technology appears to us as a “world” which escapes more and more our possibility of controlling and understanding it. Rather paradoxically, the more technique—the totality of instruments created for the transformation of the material world—becomes strong and efficacious because of its global integration into a system, the more it ends up, for a sort of inertia, by being incapable of creating authentic novelty. This is visible

96 in certain expressions we use commonly: when we say e.g. that something is JUST a technical problem, implying that it is in principle solved, and needs simply the application of a known rule, the use of a given instrument. One might say that the problem of technology is that it hides and dissolves the problems.

I insist upon this paradox because it seems to me that one of the problematic characteristics of technology in our culture, the very sense of the question concerning technology of our title, is that technology seems a machinery created to exclude the action and choice of the human subject engaged in a certain activity. Think of Chaplin’s movie *Modern times*, where the worker is pictured as totally depending on the rhythm of the machine, which he has the sole task of serving in order to allow the production to go on. Of course this is a very trivial example; but in many

senses it summarizes the elements of the question we are trying to analyze. From the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century—I am thinking also of the artistic avant-garde (futurism, e.g.) and of the global atmosphere of European culture around the first world war, technology created a “humanistic” resistance and deep fears not because of its capacity of making life easier, merchandises cheaper, etc.; but because it appeared as a form of impersonal domination of the instruments upon concrete humans which were supposed to be its masters. What is scaring in technology and explains the hostility towards it in the common everyday attitudes is the fact that it appears as a form of domination, dangerous also because apparently impersonal: against technology there is no possible clear struggle (it’s technology, baby!).

97

I must confess that this quasi identification of technology with an impersonal power that escapes any control is also more or less inspired to me by a specific experience which I live as a European citizen of our time. The increasing loss of interest in politics which is a general phenomenon not only in Italy but in a large part of European countries today is strongly related to the state of mind described by the expression I just quoted: why do you complain, it is economy—it’s capitalism; or technology etc.—baby! This expression means more or less the same as the old French one—*c’est la vie!*—which was used to accept with resignation the inescapable laws of reality which one cannot change, and which don’t even appear to depend on someone’s decision... In these times we have in Italy what we call a “technical government”—a sort of coalition which is not made up of

98 elected politicians but of economists and scholars appointed by the chief of the state and accepted with resignation by the political parties. The parties, with all their programmatic differences, have accepted the situation in order to restore an economic condition which appeared to be desperate and unsolvable without leaving aside all the conflicting political programs. There has been a sort of “realistic” acceptance of the laws of the market—it’s economy, baby. More or less like in ancient Rome, where in case of a war the senate left all the power to a dictator. I recall this Italian, and ancient roman example, to point out that technology, in the everyday use of the word, involves a sort of neutralization of conflicts in the name of a “supreme” interest, i.e., the functioning of the system which has its inner logic on which all our lives depend (“*ses lois que le coeur ne connait pas*”, one would say with Pascal.)

So what? Should one regret the political conflicts between the parties, the expensive electoral campaigns, the corruption so often connected to the mechanisms of representative democracy? I only want to remark that the neutralizing effect of the technical government exemplifies schematically the reason why people, from the very beginning of the industrial revolution and especially in 20<sup>th</sup> century, tend to feel such a strong suspicion against technology. They experience it as a power which is out of their control, and (remember certain pages of Max Weber) tends also to acquire the characters of a hidden and threatening divinity. From such observations I propose to draw the following thesis: technology appears as a threat not only, or

not mainly, because it is seen as a sort of hybris, an arrogant claim manipulating nature and competing with God himself—which is the current prevailing explanation of the fear towards it. As I remarked above, this fear has developed from the moment in which technique has defined itself as a global system which cannot be modified without breaking the global functioning of it. Too big to fail—were the American banks which had to be rescued by public funds in order to avoid a general disaster which would have involved all of us (at least this was the justification for the governments action in the last international financial crisis). What scares people in the technological globalization is not its aggressiveness towards (what we use to call) nature and its laws, but the domination and denial of freedom which is required for the regular functioning of the system. Adorno and the school of Frankfurt used to call it the “*totale Verwaltung*”—the total administration/organization. A remote anticipation of this inner tendency of technology that was going to become oppressive and authoritarian (totalitarian, as a matter of fact) can be seen in the way Max Weber describes the decisive importance of monotheism for the development of modern science. Only if all the aspects of the material world are submitted to a unique authority, and not, as it happened in polytheism, to different special divinities, it becomes possible to construe a general science of nature, with general laws valid everywhere (like the law of gravity, for instance etc.). Newton and Galilee would have never made their discoveries outside a monotheistic view of nature. Even more evident than in the case

of natural sciences is the importance of a unified “command” in the case of technology as a global system.

Herbert Marcuse, a philosopher no longer as popular as decades ago, used to interpret Marx by saying that the domination of nature has always involved the domination of some men over other men. Marcuse was also persuaded that the exit from the pre-historical era and the transition to civilization (again recalling Marx) had become possible as a consequence of technology itself, which did not require any longer the domination of man over man. This domination, although no longer strictly required by technology itself, exists still in the form of additional repression: strong and oppressive social discipline is no longer necessary as  
**100** in previous periods of history, but it lasts as a sort of inertial continuation of the privileges which the dominant class doesn't want to lose. One of the reasons why Marcuse is no longer popular today is, among others reasons, the fact that his hope seems to have lost any credibility. In a sense, Marcuse lived in a society (a half century ago, more or less) in which technology appeared still able to redeem itself from its complicity with domination which is no longer the case exactly because of the intensive development of technology in our lives.

In view of all this, our question concerning technology today should be reformulated as follows: how far and in which terms can technology be separated from domination? One has often said that technology is a sort of “second nature” for civilized man. Yes, probably this is true in the worst possible sense: like a second nature it is a dominating power which



has to be accepted: *c'est la vie*, etc. But as far as domination is still required for the functioning of the global technological system, technology is all but a neutral and natural force. It involves the persisting power of man over man, the appearance of neutrality and its power of appeasing conflicts is the worst form of domination insofar it is not recognizable as such. Are we suggesting that all of us are victims of a kind of lobotomy operated by the “system” poisoned by a social drug keeping us quiet and more or less happy? I am not inventing anything: there have been proposals of tranquilizing the masses of unemployed people by allowing them to take drugs, a method generally applied in jails in order to avoid riots and disorder. Of course, we assume (hope?) that this is not (yet) the case. But philosophers like Heidegger have spoken, outside of any science-fiction scenario, of the forgetfulness of being i.e. of the loss of any capacity of distinguishing Being (capital B) from beings as they are de facto given to us. If the ontological difference is forgotten, then the totality of Being is reduced to what there is, to the factual order of things, which excludes innovation, transformation, leaving aside revolution. The domination of technology, where all what happens is in principle planned and foreseen—this is in fact the good functioning of the *Ge-stell*—is what ideally excludes future and novelty. The fear of technology is the fear one feels in relation to a mechanic universe which promises safety insofar it excludes authentic historicity; all this is of course in large part a nightmare of pessimistic conservatives; but catches one of the risks the technological global order really runs:

the impossibility of the event, which, to come back again to Heidegger, is the synonymous of Being. In Heidegger's philosophy, as Being cannot be identified with what de facto is—because this, very simply, would make impossible to explain and live our experience of freedom (hope, fear, memory, etc. in one word: human existence), it has to be understood in terms of event: authentic Being *is not*, it happens when something changes the frame of everyday experience: a great work of art which announces a new civilization, the foundation of a new political order, the appearance of a new religion... This seems to be a too romantic idea of human history; but in fact it is the only way we have to take seriously our basic notions of historical epochs, change of paradigms, revolutions or restorations, etc.

The idea of the end of history which has been popularized in recent years by thinkers like Fukuyama has a meaning which probably Fukuyama did not consciously intend to give it. Technology, the system of the *Ge-Stell*, the predictable and planned global machinery, is the end of history insofar its functioning imposes (requires, orders) that nothing intervenes to disturb the regular working of the machine. Remember that at the beginning of the industrial revolution rioting workers, for fear of losing their jobs, destroyed the machines, in a movement which, from the name of its creator, was called **luddism (movement was named after General Ned Lud or King Ludd)**. In many sense the current situation now of labor in the Western industrial world is very similar to that; not (only) because of the machines, but because of the pretended “objective”

laws of economy where thousands of workers are losing their jobs. And that is not an objective essential consequence of technology.

Once again, the essence of technology is nothing technical; neither in the sense that technology would develop automatically because of the natural development of its inventions and creations—the development requires investments, capitals, choices etc.—nor in the sense that it would create a situation in which human conflicts, political contrasts, etc. are overcome by a pure rational—scientific, technical, organization of our common life. More clearly said: exactly because technology has no automatic development by itself, no inner tendency to increase, but requires choices, investments, decisions, it is still strongly related to power and, let me add, class struggle. The pretended neutrality of technology, like it's so often glorified as the capacity of overcoming conflicts and of creating social peace, welfare, and order, is the mask of those who own the power to direct it towards their ends. What is true and original in our situation is the (technological) power of the media, which have the capacity of making us forget Being—difference, transformations; of making us believe that there is no possible alternative to the current state of affairs. If this process goes on—not automatically, but consciously directed by the ruling classes—we have reasons to expect the end of history, because history, as a great Italian thinker, Benedetto Croce, once said, is nothing but the history of freedom.

