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3
Radical Citizenship in the Republic of Technology: A Sketch

Darin Barney

> There's only one way of life, and that's your, your own, your own.
>
> The Levellers, 'One Way' (1991)

Introduction

Near the end of his famous essay 'The Question Concerning Technology', Martin Heidegger (1977, p. 32) concludes that the only way to recover agency with respect to the enframing essence of modern technology and its associated modes of being – modes of being characterized by calculation, instrumental reason, rootlessness and the will to master human and non-human nature – is to manage somehow to 'catch sight of what comes to presence in technology, instead of merely gaping at the technological'. Of the several possible meanings of this phrase, one seems the clearest: he meant that instead of marveling or fretting over the possibilities of particular instruments, we should approach them as instances in which the truth about what it means to live in technological society is presenced or revealed. This was the so-called saving power that Heidegger thought technology harbored within itself. Every technological instrument or system unconceals the very essence of technology itself and, if we can catch sight of that, it becomes possible to establish a relationship with technology in which we do not cede to it the ground of independent moral and political judgment upon which stands human agency and citizenship. If, however, we approach discrete technologies *simply* as instruments, either to be used or even to be mastered, we give ourselves over to the enframing essence of technology, to being enframed as technological beings. And we forego the opportunity that technologies – especially

new technologies – provide for a radical engagement with how we actually live in technological society, and the possibilities of living differently. As Heidegger (1977, p. 32) puts it: 'So long as we represent technology as an instrument, we remain held fast in the will to master it. We press on past the essence of technology.'

Paragraphs such as the preceding one can get a person barred from most of the polite clubs in which the politics of technology are currently raised for discussion. To speak of the essence of anything, let alone of something as contingent as the meaning and application of technology, is to speak a dead language. And to summon the voice of Heidegger on technology is to confirm the very darkest of suspicions. These prejudices aside, there is a thought here worth thinking: the Internet is not merely another technological instrument to be used or controlled by citizens – though, as I will suggest below, these possibilities cannot be discounted either. It is also, and perhaps moreover, the latest manifestation of a particular way of taking up with the world that goes by the name of technology. In this view, asking after the prospects for radical democracy on or through the Internet, as if the latter were merely a tool, begs the question and contributes to a condition in which the possibility hoped for (namely, radical citizenship) is rendered even more remote. As Mark Poster (2001, pp. 176–77) has perceptively written: 'the Internet is more like a social space than a thing, so that its effects are more like Germany than those of hammers: the effect of Germany upon the people within is to make them Germans; the effect of hammers is not to make people hammers. . . . As long as we understand the Internet as a hammer we fail to discern the way it is like Germany.' However, it is not only because of its spatial characteristics that the Internet *makes* people what they are, as opposed to merely being *used* by them. It is also because the Internet is but one particularly brilliant technology in a vast constellation of technological devices, systems and habits that together comprise the modern Western way of knowing and acting, of being in the world. The prospects for radical democracy in relation to the Internet are thus contained within the broader horizon of the question of radical citizenship in relation to technology more generally. And it is a question not only of what we do with this particular technology, but also of what technology more generally makes of us. Citizenship, too, is a way of knowing and acting, a way of being in the world, a practice. The question is whether, and under what conditions, these two ways of being in the world, technology and citizenship, can co-exist.

Beyond membership

The answer to this question depends heavily on what is meant by citizenship. To say that citizenship is a practice is to say that it is something not merely borne but more precisely something done, not just an attribute but an act, not simply a possession inherited passively or won through due process or struggle but a habit motivated by circumstance and obligation, cultivated through education and experience, consistently performed. This way of thinking about citizenship derives from the republican tradition, and can be distinguished from the rights-based conceptions that prevail in most liberal democratic societies (Pocock, 1975; Skinner, 1978). For liberals, citizenship names a particular relationship between an individual and the state, and between the members of one national community and another. Citizenship here means the individual possession of rights against the state and corresponding obligations to it, and establishes national identities as against others in territorially-defined units. This conception animates contemporary concerns with liberal democracy's ability to accommodate the dynamics of diversity, multiculturalism, plurinationalism, migration, deterritorialization and globalization characteristic of the present era. Here, the key questions concern the principles upon which membership and its attendant rights are distributed, and the bases upon which people are formally included or excluded from the political community. Theories of social citizenship add to this an appreciation that citizenship has material, as well as formal and legal, requirements (Marshall, 1965). In this view, the effectiveness of things like membership, rights and freedoms rests not only on equality before and under the law but also upon relatively equal access to the social and material resources that allow people to act on these entitlements.

In this line of thinking, citizenship is about the formal qualifications, obligations and benefits of political membership, and the conditions of their just distribution. There are potentially many interesting and critical questions about the relationship between citizenship and technology that could be raised from this perspective, but most of them reside firmly within the horizon established by liberalism itself, and do not open onto more radical terrain. Most of these questions also implicitly confirm the technological dispensation, rather than exposing it to interrogation.[1] Such openings might be provided by an account of citizenship that is not confined to questions about the conditions or extent of *membership* in a liberal polity (*who gets in?*), or to questions about the

distribution of material resources needed to make such membership practicable (*who gets what?*), but extends to questions about the quality of citizenship as a practice (*what do people do?*).

Citizenship as political judgment

The practice of citizenship is, at its core, the practice of political judgment. To be a citizen is to bear the rights and obligations attached to membership in a given political community; to be *as* a citizen is to engage in judgment about common things in relation to and with others. This conception of citizenship as engagement in political judgment originates in Aristotle, and works its way through the republican traditions of Machiavelli and Arendt and the democratic traditions of Rousseau and Habermas (to name but a handful of representative figures). In his comprehensive meditation on the substance of political judgment, Ronald Beiner (1983, p. 8) observes that 'judgment is a natural capacity of human beings that can, potentially, be shared by all'. Aside from its essentially and radically democratic character, political judgment demarcates the boundary of the practice of citizenship quite expansively, while naming the characteristic activity within this boundary quite precisely. As Beiner (1983, p. 8) writes:

> In every contact we have with the political world we are engaged in judgment. Judging is what we do when we read politics in our morning newspaper, when we discuss politics during family or friendly conversation, and when we watch politics on television. Judging is also what we as academics do when we try to keep abreast of the political developments in our world, or when we strive to appraise the course of modern political history. And, finally, judging is what we are doing also when we *do* politics, that is, when we act in a public setting or assume public responsibilities for which we are held accountable. The normal kind of contact that each of us – academics, political observers, and common citizens – has with politics is the opportunity to judge.

If it is allowed that 'common citizens' stands for the great breadth and diversity of subject positions present in contemporary political communities, the scope of political judgment as the characteristic practice of citizenship broadens significantly.

There is a great deal to consider in a conception of citizenship that posits political judgment as its practical core, and a thoroughgoing defense would entail more than is possible in this brief sketch.[2] There are, however, two considerations that bear elaboration in the present context: the modes of political judgment and the scope of its application.

As suggested above, the primary avenues along which citizenship as the practice of political judgment has traveled into the modern political imagination are republicanism and democracy. In the republican tradition, citizenship consists in 'active participation in a dialogue that weighs the substantive merit of competing conceptions of the good and that aims at transforming social arrangements in the direction of what is judged, in this active public dialogue, as the best possible (individual and collective) good' (Beiner, 1992, p. 104). Of particular importance here is the specification of dialogue as the privileged mode of engagement in political judgment. In Beiner's account, dialogic speech is central not only to republicanism, but to any account of citizenship that places the practice of political judgment at its center. 'Political experience', Beiner (1983, p. xiv) writes, 'as a specific mode of being in the world, is constituted by speech, by the capacity of human beings to humanize their world through communication, discourse and talk about what is shared and thus available for intersubjective judgment'. Political judgment as the substantive core of citizenship becomes a critical concept to the extent that it draws attention to 'that which alone can qualify the political sphere of existence as authentically political, namely, speech' (Beiner, 1983, p. xvi). The sort of dialogue presented here as constitutive of the political is not simply the strategic assertion of interests in speech, but their formation, alongside that of the self- and other- understandings upon which these interests are based, through the medium of dialogic speech by which the interests and understandings of others can be publicly encountered. This identification of a particular sort of speech as the privileged mode of political judgment and citizenship connects the republican tradition to contemporary theories of communicative action, discourse ethics and deliberative democracy. According to Beiner (1983, p. 152), the thread running through the fabric of 'what Arendt and Habermas call a public realm or a public space, what Charles Taylor has called a deliberative culture, and what in the traditional vocabulary goes by the name of a republic', is an understanding that 'it is through rational dialogue, and especially through political dialogue, that we clarify, even to ourselves, who we are and what we want ... it is through speech and deliberation that man finds the location of his proper humanity, between beast and god, in the life of the citizen.'

Modes of judgment

This is, perhaps, a step too far. The singularity of rational dialogue in this formulation suggests that it is not engagement in political judgment *per se* that constitutes citizenship but, rather, engagement in a particular mode of political judgment, namely, rational dialogue. When it is identified so strongly with reasoned speech – arguably one among several possible modes – political judgment as the definitive practice of citizenship is imbued with an exclusive character that risks narrowing its purchase as a critical category. It also belies the intuition that 'common citizens' are engaged in political judgment 'in *every* contact we have with the political world' (Beiner, 1983, p. 8. Emphasis added). As Engin Isin (2002, p. 3) points out, constitution of the category 'citizen' always simultaneously entails constitution of its other, a second, subaltern category marked by a lack or absence of the positive quality that defines the first. In this case, to define citizenship as engagement in political judgment *in the mode of rational dialogue* is to exclude and subordinate all those whose characteristic or preferred modes of engaging in political judgment do not conform to the (prevailing) norms of reasoned speech (Young, 1997). If rational dialogue (or, even more narrowly, rational argument) is either identical with political judgment, or the only mode of practicing the latter that merits the designation of citizenship, then those who engage with the political world in other modes are relegated to alterity as either beasts or gods (most often beasts), but definitely not citizens.

Broadly speaking, the identification of citizenship with rational dialogue is part of a long-standing project that seeks to distinguish politics from violence and irrationality, to replace coercion and prejudice with what Habermas (1993, p. 163) has called 'the unforced force of the better argument'. It inherits the ancient Greek distinction between a citizen, who had to be persuaded, and a slave or a wife, both of whom could be ordered around. A logocentric definition of citizenship rules out accepting violence as a mode of political action undertaken by citizens *qua* citizens. Historically, it has also provided ideological cover for the exclusion from citizenship and public life of entire classes of people deemed insufficiently rational, typically women, aliens or strangers, and the mass public. This may be too high a price to pay, even if we agree that rational dialogue or reasoned argument is the best mode of engagement in political judgment. Paying this price can be avoided, however, by retaining political judgment as the core of the practice of citizenship while relinquishing its exclusive identification with

reasoned speech narrowly defined. This requires acknowledgement of the multiplicity of modes in which citizens might make political judgments, and the contribution made to the struggle for justice by these modes of expression and the people who use them. Concretely: when the Madres de Plaza de Mayo marched silently and incessantly before the presidential palace in Buenos Aires, their heads covered with white handkerchiefs embroidered with the names of their disappeared children, they were engaged, resolutely and dramatically, in political judgment (Guzman Bouvard, 1994). It is not clear that public mourning comprises reasoned speech or dialogue, but it is undeniable that the Mothers were making a claim and practicing citizenship.[3] The same might be said of the hacktivists running the OpenNet Initiative (2006), who research, test and promote technologies designed to assist democratic activists seeking to circumvent censorship, surveillance and data filtration by authoritarian states. Writing code that makes it possible for a Chinese dissident to access unfiltered Google results surreptitiously might not be reasoned speech, but it surely is the act of a person making a political judgment, a person practicing citizenship.

Examples such as these suggest that a radical version of citizenship as political judgment will have to recognize the broadest possible range of modes of engaging in this practice, and extend well beyond narrow conceptions of reasoned speech or rational dialogue. This is not to say that every action (in speech or otherwise) is political – as will be discussed below, the designation 'political' has substantive dimensions as well – but just that there are a multiplicity of modes (and, by implication, media) of action in which political judgment might be at work. Perhaps all that is necessary is a sympathetic and flexible reading of the words speech, dialogue, deliberation and language, which takes them as placeholders for an array of analogous modes of action and expression. Perhaps, to qualify as a mode of political judgment, action or expression need only be *like* reasoned speech, *like* dialogue, or *like* deliberation insofar as it makes or weighs a *claim*, a claim about justice or the good life, by means of something *like* language. Thus, for example, what is really important about the stipulation that political judgment involves dialogue is not that the practice therefore requires speech *per se* but, rather, that making or weighing of claims about justice or the good life is never monological, always carried out either with or in relation to others who also judge. Even Beiner, who strongly identifies political judgment with particular modes of reasoned speech, nevertheless insists that storytelling and spectatorship (modes of communication that do not necessarily require speech) are crucial modes of engaging in political

judgment. By telling stories – in speech, yes, but also in writing, images, movement, architecture and artifacts – we 'define a conception of the human good' (Beiner, 1983, p. 126). And while it may seem a stretch to say that 'Judging is what we do . . . when we watch politics on television', Beiner's illumination of the political character of spectatorship suggests an expansive, rather than limited repertoire of possible modes of political action: 'The function of the spectator is to interpret, to understand, and to judge. If we are not mistaken, these activities of understanding and judging the drama of human affairs are at the very heart of political experience, of what it means to be politically' (Beiner, 1983, p. 161).[4] Again, the point here is that political judgment, not a particular manner of speaking, is the core of citizenship, and political judgment can be enacted in a variety of ways.

The right and the good

Not all judgment is political. As suggested above, part of what makes political judgment *political* is that it always involves others. However, along with this formal attribute, political judgment has a substantive attribute: it is judgment brought to bear on claims about justice and the good life, with the latter understood not as the prosperous life or the easy life but a life lived well in common with others. Another way to put this is to say that political judgment concerns both (good) ends and (just) means. Radical citizenship, then, would suggest a practice of political judgment that includes consideration of both means and ends, and encompasses a broad range of objects within each of these categories. The scope of application of such a practice would extend significantly beyond that which is typical of most contemporary liberal democratic societies. It would entail, for example, public consideration of basic economic arrangements – not just whether taxes are too high or too low, but whether capitalism is the best way to live – a question that scarcely can be asked in the present climate, and for whose answer no publicly viable vocabulary currently exists.

This example, alone, suggests the radical character of a conception of citizenship that hinges on political judgment exercised in both the moral and ethical spheres. The moral sphere refers to questions of justice, or right (that is, the justness or rightness of norms), adjudicated against a backdrop of generally shared commitments. The ethical sphere refers to questions concerning these basic commitments themselves, questions of the good which, in the debased public vocabulary of contemporary politics, are often rendered as questions of 'values'.[5] In other

words, the moral sphere is reserved for questions of means (by what means – prohibitions, incentives, silence, violence – can we justly meet the ends to which we are committed?) while questions of substantive ends (what should we be, want or do and why?) are located in the ethical sphere. Both liberal theory and liberal democratic institutions posit a sharp distinction between the moral and the ethical spheres, by which questions of right are publicized and political, and questions of the good are privatized and personal. Ideally, membership in a liberal polity provides citizens with formal opportunities to participate in political judgment over controversies in the moral sphere, via neutral procedures and institutions, while guaranteeing that their personal ethical commitments will never require public justification, or be subject to the political judgment of others.

Together, these ideals provide for the so-called priority of the right over the good, the ground upon which most contemporary versions of liberalism meet (Ackerman, 1980; Dworkin, 1977; Nozick, 1974; Rawls, 1971, 1993). This priority is motivated by cultural pluralism, in which citizens in a given polity are said to hold a diverse array of conceptions of the good life, and to disagree over which among them is best. Under these conditions, the bedrock liberal commitment to individual autonomy demands that such disagreements not be politicized: the 'values' that comprise a given individual's or community's conception of the good life are personal and private, and political adjudication between them risks illiberal imposition of one individual's or group's 'values' upon others; a liberal state thus strives for institutions and procedures that provide for political conflicts over matters of justice while remaining neutral as to the competing conceptions of the good life that might animate parties to such conflicts. From a slightly different angle, Jürgen Habermas's (1990) theory of discourse ethics arrives at the same conclusion. For Habermas, the question is how norms can be legitimated in the context of pluralism, and the answer is only by a process of rational argumentation (the discourse principle) through which all those affected by the norm in question can agree that it accords with their interests (the universalization principle). Normative questions of justice are located in the moral sphere, and can be resolved politically, even among those who adhere to differing conceptions of the good life, so long as they all share a basic ethical commitment to democratic legitimacy and proceed according to the rationality implicit in their conversations. However, the same cannot be said for adjudication of competing ethical claims, as these reflect private 'value' commitments deeply rooted in culture, tradition and experience, which do not admit

of rational argumentation and justification. Here again, the question of the good life is shunted to the private realm. Discourse ethicists do not think we can give public reasons in support of our ethical commitments; liberals do not think we should ever have to do so.

The priority of the right over the good, as expressed in both contemporary liberalism and discourse ethics, has come under considerable critical scrutiny from several quarters (Benhabib, 1992; MacIntyre, 1981; MacIntyre, 1988; Mouffe 1993; Sandel, 1982; Taylor, 1985; Walzer 1983; Warnke, 1995). Two issues are particularly relevant to a consideration of technology and citizenship, and both are rendered succinctly by Beiner, arguably liberalism's most trenchant contemporary critic. The first is the thinness of the ethical pluralism central to the self-image of liberal societies, and the incoherence of liberalism's purported commitment to neutrality on the question of the good life. As Beiner (1992, pp. 22–23) writes: 'The starting point for an understanding of liberalism is the notion that there is a distinctive liberal way of life, characterized by the aspiration to increase and enhance the prerogatives of the individual; by maximal mobility in all directions, throughout every dimension of social life; and by a tendency to turn all areas of human activity into matters of consumer preference; a way of life based on progress, growth and technological dynamism.' Liberalism, like all social orders, 'is a global dispensation – that is, a way of life that excludes other ways of life' (Beiner, 1992, p. 24). This suggests that the neutral liberal state is primarily an ideological construction. 'Is it neutral', Beiner (1992, p. 24) asks, 'about continual growth and higher productivity? Is it neutral about scientific progress? Is it neutral about the market as a means of maximizing consumer choices?' It is not, and this is because there is a vision of the good at the core of liberalism which prefigures an answer to each of these questions, 'namely, that choice in itself is the highest good' (Beiner, 1992, p. 25).

A liberal order's devotion to the principle of choice does not, however, extend to public choice-making about this principle itself for, as discussed above, the liberal dispensation defines ethical choices about the substance of the good as private, personal matters, rather than an occasion for political judgment. Thus it is that liberalism severely truncates the practice of citizenship by limiting the scope of political judgment to moral deliberation upon issues of justice (including distributive justice). As Beiner (1992, pp. 100–101) observes, liberal notions of citizenship typically turn on participation in political dialogue, 'but it is a dialogue where the topic of conversation is always the same and the parties to the discussion always utter the same monotonous formula. . . .

There is no conversation about the kinds of individual or social purposes that might be *worthy* of pursuit, since questions of this sort would violate the whole liberal agenda, premised on the bracketing of any content. Instead, the citizens discuss one thing and one thing only: who gets what for the pursuit of individual life-projects.' As will be discussed below, this tendency becomes particularly pronounced when liberalism, capitalism and technology assemble to comprise the setting in which the prospect of citizenship unfolds. A social order that systematically exempts from political judgment the ethical commitments that comprise its own account of the good life cannot support a regime of radical citizenship, at least not insofar as the word 'radical' is understood in its originary sense: of the root.

Means, object, setting

Technology relates to citizenship in three respects: as the means, object and setting of political judgment. The Internet and related digital, networked information and communication technologies are a striking example of this tripartite relationship.

As means of citizenship, technologies – especially communication technologies – can be used to mediate judgment practiced in a variety of modes. This is as true of the aerosol spray-paint can as it is of the Internet, but the latter has brought the potential of technology as a means of citizenship into high relief. While it would be misleading to suggest that the bulk of what occurs online is motivated by, or directed to, explicitly political ends, or that democratic politics is somehow what the Internet is all about, it is undeniable that the Internet has become an important instrument for those who are inclined to political judgment or action in one form or another. Whether it is the conventional politics of official leaders, governments, elections and political parties, or the marginal politics of opposition, resistance, solidarity and reform, the Internet is now a standard means of political engagement for many citizens. The modes of engagement mediated by this technology are genuinely diverse. They include: production, distribution and consumption of political information; mediation of political discussion, debate and deliberation; organization, mobilization and publicization of offline political action; as well as novel forms of tactical action within the spaces created by the medium itself (such as, for example, politically motivated denial-of-service attacks). The broad repertoires of action facilitated by this medium have, arguably, highlighted the need to recognize modes of political judgment beyond engagement in rational

speech in the context of conventional liberal democratic institutions and roles. Nevertheless, a radical conception of citizenship concerns not just a diversity of modes of engagement in political judgment, but also the substance of that against which judgment is brought to bear. Citizens, especially marginalized ones, have forever capitalized on the affordances of new media in creative ways. The novelty of the Internet, and its mediation of a broad range of modes of political judgment, do not themselves satisfy the requirements of radical citizenship in the larger technological context in which the medium is situated.

A technology such as the Internet comprises not just a medium through which we might engage in public judgment about common ends and the means to achieve them, but is also an artifact or system that *constitutes* ends and means in relation to which we might reasonably expect to exert political judgment. This to say that technology is also an object of political judgment or, at least, that it should be. In a social world in which technology often seems to appear as if by magic from behind drawn curtains, and to produce non-negotiable outcomes, it seems almost fantastic to suggest that technology is properly an object of citizenship, but this is precisely what the very best democratic critiques of technology have taught us: that technology is 'like legislation' (Feenberg, 1999, p. 131); that 'artifacts have politics' (Winner, 1986, p. 19); that 'code is law' (Lessig, 1999, p. 3). Technology is properly an object of citizenship because it is intimately bound up in the establishment and enforcement of prohibitions and permissions, the distribution of power and resources, and the structure of human practices and relationships. In short, justice is at stake in the design, development, regulation and governance of technological devices and systems, and this recommends their elevation from technical to political matters, the establishment of what Latour (2005, p. 14) has recently termed 'an object-oriented democracy'.

Here, too, the Internet provides a case in point, for how else but as matters of justice that demand political consideration should we define issues of access and connectivity, protocol, domain and network regulation, intellectual property, and electronic surveillance? Yet, despite the existence of highly mobilized activist constituencies surrounding these and other issues, the design, development and regulation of the Internet has been more or less exempt from formal, democratic political determination, left instead to the private interests of scientists, engineers, military and police agencies, major corporations, technocrats and consumers, a pattern typical of most technological development. It is in this sense that formal de-politicization of technology stands among the

most serious democratic deficits of the present age. Still, social studies of technology have taught us that distinct technologies achieve their design, and assume their character and meaning, after a long, non-linear process of negotiation, appropriation and adaptation involving multiple actors in shifting relationships and contexts (Bijker et al., 1992). These moments provide opportunities for the exertion of judgment, including political judgment, at several points and in a variety of modes. It is under this rubric that we might consider illicit distribution of encryption and anonymizing technology, use of peer-to-peer file sharing networks, and circulation of free and open source software as acts of political judgment.

Radical citizenship in a technological context would seem to require that technologies such as the Internet be approached as objects of political judgment, whether systematically via formal institutions or haphazardly in the process of their social construction. Achieving this would be a step in a direction that might be called radical, insofar as it would demand significant restructuring of well-established relationships between science, technology, capital and the state, and a corresponding re-distribution of social, economic and political power. However, it is not clear that simply subjecting technological development to the political judgment of citizens would be radical in the sense of opening it (and them) to the ethical question of technology as an end that defines the good life. It is possible that citizens would ask themselves this question when engaged in judgment over a technological controversy – such as, for example, over whether the state should have unfettered access to the records of Internet service providers – but it is not necessary. One need not contest the technological dispensation in order to struggle against the unjust direction imposed upon it by Microsoft, AT&T, Verizon and the Pentagon. It is more likely that citizens engage in such contests because of commitments that do not challenge the ethical basis of technology whatsoever. Indeed, it is at least plausible that the imperative to subject technology to political judgment in the moral sphere arises from the same ethical commitment to mastery that drives the technological enterprise itself. This is perhaps what Heidegger (1977) had in mind when he observed, ominously, that all attempts to control technology by democratic means are themselves technological behavior.

Citizenship in the eclipse

In the 1990s, when governments across the liberal democratic world declared the imperative to build national and global digital network

infrastructures, they were making a claim about the good life. When AT&T sells its high-speed Internet service with the promise 'Your World. Delivered', it is making a claim about the good life. And when progressive activists decry the digital divide they are not only passing judgment on the injustice of unequal access to important tools and resources, they are also making, or at least confirming, a claim about the good life. A radical practice of citizenship will reckon with these claims, which are either explicitly or implicitly ethical claims about ends that are worth pursuing, claims about the best way to live.

Technological societies do not provide a hospitable setting for this sort of reckoning. A technological society is one that is saturated by complex technological devices and systems, and which experiences perpetual technological dynamism; it is one in which material life, and in particular the economy, is bound up tightly with technological activity; a society in which security, prosperity, freedom and progress are identified culturally with technological development; a society in which convenience, commodity and readiness-to-hand are highly valued; a society in which the instrumental rationality characteristic of technology, whereby the questioning of ends is routinely subsumed under the optimization of means, penetrates otherwise non-technological spheres of interest and activity (Borgmann, 1984; Ellul, 1964; Grant, 1969; Simpson, 1995). In this sense, technologies are not just instruments but, as Winner (1986, p. 12) contends, 'forms of life': 'As they become woven into the texture of everyday existence, the devices, techniques, and systems we adopt shed their tool-like qualities to become part of our very humanity. In an important sense we become the beings who work on assembly lines, who talk on telephones, who do our figuring on pocket calculators, who eat processed foods, who clean our homes with powerful chemicals.'

As a way of being in the world technology mitigates against other ways of being in the world, including citizenship, especially when the latter is understood to be a practice of political judgment that includes ethical questions. It does this by so thoroughly occupying the 'foreground' of our experience that it eclipses both its own ethical background and any possible alternatives (Borgmann, 1984, pp. 48–56). As Lorenzo Simpson (1995, p. 40) observes, critical self-understanding requires that our experience 'pose questions to us about our way of being, about how we live our lives'. This is the essential ground upon which political judgment of ethical claims must rest: 'Our earnest seeking after "the good life" requires the problematization of prereflective interpretations, a virtualization of the claims they make on us, in that

they must be cast into a space of possible alternatives. . . . Such a dislocation is a manifestation of our freedom from unreflected prejudices, a freedom and displacement which are necessary if we are to continue to distinguish meaningfully between the 'good life' and the way we just happen to see things, and to seek the former' (Simpson, 1995, 40). In a technological society, the question of what is good, or how to live, is prejudicially answered in the very fabric of its material constitution, yet it provides little or no space in which the claims technology makes upon us can be confronted with viable alternatives. And even if such space existed, it is not clear that inhabitants of technological societies any longer have at their disposal an ethical vocabulary that is displaced from what they see in the technology that surrounds them. As George Grant (1969, p. 139) has written: 'All coherent languages beyond those which serve the drive to unlimited freedom through technique have been broken up in the coming to be of what we are. . . . We have been left with no words which cleave together and summon out of uncertainty the good of which we may sense the dispossession.' Thus the pervasive and brilliant everydayness of technological experience works to obscure its contingency as an ethical claim that might be subject to political judgment in relation to competing claims: 'It reigns as common sense, as the obvious way of doing things which requires no discussion and, more important, is not accessible to discussion. It is understood in the sense of being taken for granted' (Borgmann, 1984, p. 35).

In this eclipse of the ethical dimension of political judgment, contemporary liberalism conspires with technology against radical citizenship. It does so not only by recommending strongly against the politicization of ethical questions, but by giving an account of the good life that resembles very closely the account given in technology. In the section 'The Right and the Good', the prevailing ethic of liberalism was rendered as commitment to the principle of choice, but when liberalism is held together with technology it becomes clear that this commitment is the token of an even deeper devotion to 'that primal western affirmation . . . the affirmation of human beings as "will"' (Grant, 1974, pp. 63–64). Under the liberal dispensation, the good life is understood as individual autonomy and self-realization achieved through free exertion of the will, an account that comports well with a technological society's promises of freedom, mastery, convenience and choice. This is the root to which a radical practice of citizenship in technological society must address itself. To do so publicly will be a challenge, for liberalism and technology form a circle of mutual reinforcement that is difficult to interrupt: 'Freedom's great achievement is that it allowed modern technology to appear . . .

Technology's great achievement was that it allowed freedom to flourish' (Grant, 1974, p. 3). Borgmann (1984, pp. 92–94) goes so far as to posit an ethical identity between liberalism and technology: 'Liberal democracy is enacted as technology. It does not leave the question of the good life open but answers it along technological lines . . . when we promote a just society along liberal democratic lines, we also advance the technological society and its specific and dubious notion of the good life.' While denying the possibility of political judgment of ethical claims in the public sphere, liberalism nevertheless advances a particular vision of the good life that just happens to be the same as the vision offered by technological society. And, as with the claims of technology, the claims of liberalism are so pervasive they scarcely register as claims at all. Liberal, capitalist, technological society need not defend its claim to being the best way to live, because it is the only way.

Taken together, technology and liberalism cast a sort of spell under which the space of political judgment shrinks from view, or at least that portion of it in which ethical claims about the substance of the good life might be critically engaged. For all its promise in mediating diverse modes of engagement in political judgment on questions of justice, the Internet also reinforces conditions that undermine the possibility of bringing political judgment to bear on the ethical dimensions of living in a technological society. Along with being a means and object of political judgment, the Internet is part of the broader setting in which the prospects of radical citizenship are situated. It represents a way of being in the world that does not conduce to being in the world as a citizen who engages with others over the question of what it means to live well under contemporary conditions. Perhaps the first task for radical citizenship in the age of the Internet is to reclaim the space in which political judgment can be brought to bear on ethical claims, and to refuse to accept prejudicially that the question of the good life in the midst of technology can be closed with the answer given by technology itself.

Notes

1. If the question is digital technology's threat to rights of privacy, the answer is encryption or anonymizing technology; if the question is the digital divide, the answer is more extensive access to technology.
2. For more on contemporary debates surrounding political judgment see Beiner (1983) and Beiner & Nedelsky (2001).
3. To be sure, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo also spoke, wrote, organized and ultimately engaged the formal political system. My point here is that they were acting politically from the moment they simply stood on the Plaza.

4. Beiner's redemption of the spectator is not an endorsement of the non-politics of the mass spectacle characteristic of North American representative democracies. For his full account see Beiner (1983, pp. 159–62).
5. 'Values' is a term smuggled into political vocabulary from the grammar of the market. Aside from cheapening ethical commitments and diminishing the gravity of questioning them (for nothing is so easily compromised, disregarded, or exchanged as a mere 'value'), this language immediately transforms them into private, subjective choices, unintelligible in the political sphere. For a complete critique of values discourse, see Andrew (1995). For the place of values discourse in technological society see Winner (1986, pp. 155–63).

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4
Civic Identity and Net Activism: The Frame of Radical Democracy

Peter Dahlgren

Introduction

While the discourses about the dilemmas or even crises of liberal democracy have become familiar, especially in its emphasis on the decline in civic engagement, we also witness a kind of resurgence of political involvement, but mostly in ways different from traditional party politics. The numbers involved are probably comparatively small (it is difficult to accurately assess the magnitude), yet the energy and intensity manifested are encouraging. Extra-parliamentarian groups and movements, NGO's, global networks, and so on represent a re-engagement in politics, not least in regard to what is often called 'anti-globalization', but more accurately could be termed alter-globalization, since the critiques are not directed at globalization per se, but rather at its neo-liberal character. In fact, those engaged in such oppositional politics are often active at the global level themselves. Much of this engagement not only makes use of the Internet and other newer, interactive communication technologies (such as mobile telephony), but is in fact quite dependent on it. Without the technology to facilitate this participation, much alter-globalization politics would simply not happen. Yet, the technology, even if we at some level deem it necessary, can never be sufficient. Only a simplistic position of technological determinism would argue that the Internet 'causes' such participation. We have to understand such civic engagement in broader socio-cultural terms. Still, the technology facilitates, helps prepare, and tends to define the conditions and character of the involvement.

In this chapter I will be exploring some of the theoretical parameters around the notions of citizenship and democratic participation, with alter-globalization politics and the use of the Internet as my empirical