

# Reorienting our Wheel: An Age of Control

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## **Hershocks Pessimism: A Few Key Elements**

In *Reinventing the Wheel*, Peter. D. Hershock gives a fresh perspective on technological pessimism, but also offers insight as to how we can overcome the faults of technology and society today. Focusing on the developed world, Hershock examines how modern technology paradoxically fails to meet its promises at even the most fundamental levels, let alone rise to meet the general expectation of providing us with better and more fulfilling lives. Furthermore, it is not simply that our lives have failed to improve, but in some regards are actually worsening. He attributes the role and state of technology today to Western ideology and its impact on social and technological development around the world. By adopting some Buddhist teachings and ideals, he argues, we may be able to change our expectations of technology and its course from here, and also reshape society for the better.

We build technology in effort to overcome our circumstances. Heating lets us overcome the cold, a mining machine allows the weakest-bodied man to cut into mountains, and modern medicine allows us to mitigate and sometimes even elude the effects of injury and disease. We feel that technology is taking us to some promised place of better, longer lives (Hershock, 1999, 35). Due to its apparent benefits in quality of living, as well as its widespread acceptance around the globe, many feel that the state of affairs in the first world is the next step for all of civilization. Globalization and technology are ways of bringing people who are behind up to pace, not unlike Friedman's attitude in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (Friedman, 1999). Capitalism and the first world are the next step that every society must be willing to take on the road to betterment. However, Hershock feels that technology will not bring us what we think it will.

Hershock states that technology is intrinsically paradoxical – he calls it “the original broken promise.” He feels that technology does not achieve what we develop it for, even at the most basic levels. For instance, Hershock cites that as societies acquire the technology to travel faster, people within those societies actually spend more time in transit than before; those with autos and buses spend more time in travelling than those on bicycle or on foot (Hershock, 1999, 52). Hershock makes a case study of Hawaii in order to explain the full scope of technology’s paradoxical and even detrimental impact: after colonization, he says, the work week of the Hawaiian native increased from as few as twenty work hours to as many as over fifty-five, alcoholism and obesity are more prevalent among native Hawaiians than ever before, and the tropical paradise that once was has now been pillaged and transformed into a vacationing place for countless thousands of tourists year-round. This is the effect of first world development in Hawaii – the same development we claim leads to better, easier, and more fulfilling lives (Hershock, 1999, 41-43). What Hershock describes is not far from what Richard Layard states in his lectures: increasing wealth and technological sophistication, after some point, is no longer correlated with increasing happiness (Layard, 2003b)(Layard, 2003a). If such “progress” is ultimately damaging to us, why do we make it?

We are often rather oblivious to technology’s paradoxical and even detrimental effects on society. “Each one of our ‘victories’ actually translates into a more transparent and clever opponent—an opponent so adept that in the end we don’t even know who or what is hitting us” (Hershock, 1999, 281). This idea rings of McLuhans great claim that “the medium is the message,” and that armed with reason, we may not perceive it (Norden, 1969). The changes are widespread and permanent – while you can toss any individual piece of equipment in your home, “television cannot simply be unplugged and given away to the Salvation Army” (Hershock, 1999, 22). Every technology we develop has a drastic impact on who we are as individuals and as a people, and unless we are able to perceive these changes and understand their source, we will be unable to combat its negative impacts on our lives.

We do not perceive the negative effects of technology because at first glance, technology appears to meet its goal of making us more independent, free, and self-sufficient (Hershock, 1999, 40-41). However, this image is false; while we may have gained access individually to a myriad of goods and services, ready for our consumption, the vast network of people, places, and things that create and bring them to us still exists – it has been merely obscured. Shopping for groceries, we are often not mindful of the people

who grow, process, and transport our food. The people that we rely on have been reduced to black boxes in a supply chain, while in reality we all depend on one another other to survive. However, what we concern ourselves with in our technological endeavours is their perceived, factual end result: that in our grocery store, we are able to individually select exactly what we want to eat when we want to eat it. This surface-level freedom and choice extend to throughout our lives: I am able to control the climate of my house, and you are able to control the climate of your house. However, we have this freedom if and only if we isolate my house from your house, and thereby ourselves from each other.

Hershock cautions that we are entering a world in which people are increasingly lonely. “Instead of living among neighbors,” he says, “we find ourselves living beside strangers.” (Hershock, 1999, 133) Our quest for autonomy has become a frantic struggle for isolation not only from our neighbors, but from our surroundings, professions, and the world. The carpenter used to cut his trees by hand, but they are now brought to him as milled boards. He used to build by hand, laboring for days and weeks to make works of art, and his trade was thereby an extension of himself; he now quickly throws together boards with power tools and CAD designs (Hershock, 1999, 50). His role in society is now fragmented and realized by a network of loggers, truck-drivers, button-pushers, purchasers, contract managers, and efficiency experts (Hershock, 1999, 245). These are careers of people no longer in touch with the trees, the things they build, and the people they affect. Each individual role is meaningless and unfulfilling.

This life of segmented unfulfillment extends from the manual labor to the office worker, to the scientist and engineer. Humans have become commodities in an inhuman and self-serving, as Hershock calls it, “technological juggernaut.” As our roles in society become more fragmented and our value as individuals in the workplace declines, expert professionalism becomes the norm. As Schmidt describes in his account *Disciplined Minds*, the individual is anonymous, expendable, and serves a single purpose: developing technical solutions to technical problems (Schmidt, 2000). Humans in the workplace are disregarded and treated as a mere means for profit. Hershock describes this productivity-extracting system as a manifestation of the ‘colonial method, in which the colonist aggressor enters a colonized culture, systematically disassembling the culture and its individuals for selfish gain. As our social and technological infrastructure stands, Hershock says, it is in effect the colonization of our consciousness (Hershock, 1999, 67-79). Our

minds, our efforts, and our attentions are pillaged for profit; at the end of a long work day, we are left completely exhausted. It is not uncommon for us to find ourselves needing to divert our attention from one another to television or the Internet in order to “decompress” or “unwind” (Hershock, 1999, 206). Our capacity for attention and focus has been drained, going to some other self-serving power. However, we feel that technology must have some redeeming quality – after all, we created it for a reason, right?

One redeeming quality about technology we pose is the ability to be aware of things happening around the globe. Through television and the Internet, we are, as McLuhan predicted, realizing some sort of global consciousness through which we can watch, experience, and communicate with people everywhere in the world (Norden, 1969). But Hershock and Mehta (in his article *Bhopal Lives*) independently conclude that these interactions are actually non-meaningful. Watching a news network with live feeds of grief-stricken foreigners struggling through war, famine, and disaster does little to enable us to empathize with them; rather, we are desensitized to their stories (Mehta, 1996). We can follow the documentary series of an impoverished family in Bosnia for weeks, feeling somehow connected to them, but we don't at all experience their loss if their family members die (Hershock, 1999, 89-90). Moreover, we can always turn to other documentaries, other cultures, flipping through channels to see image after image of unique and beautiful cultures. We can always turn the television off, or even turn on something light-hearted and entertaining. The stories of these people, like human labor and thought, have become commodities for our consumption.

This trend of commoditization is not restricted to things which are distant from us; other things close at hand and to heart, such as our identities, have now become commodities as well. We can change our lifestyles on a dime – from snazzy suits to cultural garb, from indie rock to classical music, from vegetarian hippie to carnivorous businessman. This is true more than ever on the Internet – in a matter of seconds we can assume an identity of whatever age or gender we so choose (Hershock, 1999). Our freedom and range of choices also allows us to have different experiences and identities within the home: we may put on different headphones and browse different pages on the web, or spend time watching television rather than interacting with one another. To page through lifestyles and experiences is effortless, because such changes now have very little meaning. We are living in a world where we treat things as icons – objects of specific, definite, and incomplete meaning.

Most everything in the first world is seen as an icon. We instill every

object around us - books, shelves, tables, buses, even our identities and different cultures – with specific meaning, and do not appreciate them beyond that (Hershock, 1999, 172). This is in great contrast to the behavior of children, who are still learning what things are; an infant will perceive things in amazing ways unimaginable to adults, playing with wine glasses and keyboards as toys alike. However, this only continues until the child expresses for the first time that she is bored. The first day a child is bored marks the day she has iconized everything in her reach – she no longer knows how to view things in previously unimagined ways, and there is no fascination left in the world around her (Hershock, 1999, 170). This is the state in which we lead our lives. When someone presents us with something for which we have no immediately apparent use, we might question “why” or “what for.” In essence, we are losing our ability to be even pleasantly surprised (Hershock, 1999, 162-178,195-198). As we lose our identities, communities, and ability to be surprised, we should find it predictable that we are also losing our ability to help ourselves.

As we lead isolated, exhausted, iconized lives, many of us seek help. But all too often that help comes in the wrong form – the form by which we try to exercise even more individuality, freedom, and control. In response to the growing drug problem, we formulate the “Just Say No” campaign – a campaign which asserts that people have the freedom of choice, the will, and ultimately the individual ability to decline drugs. We do not consider that perhaps the ability for a drug user to feel how they want to, when they want to, is already an attempt to exercise control over how they feel. Offering people control as an alternative to control will not solve their issues . The problem can be even more subtle – a clinically depressed office worker who can no longer find or add meaning to his life may seek medical attention, and a psychiatrist may provide him with a prescription that allows him to keep his depression “under control”. However, that set of medication only places the worker back in his environment. It gives him control, but does not solve his actual problems (Hershock, 1999, 150-152). Attacking the problem with the problem – fighting fire with fire – will get us nowhere.

The assertion that our obsession with freedom, individuality, and control is responsible for our technological circumstance is what makes Hershocks technological pessimism unique. He states that things did not have to turn out this way, and offers the history of China as evidence – the Chinese developed black powder before Europeans, and had comparable literacy rates with Europeans throughout early Western colonial periods. However, China did

not behave as the West did, expanding into country after country, spreading technology and colonizing by force (Hershock, 1999, 261). If we accept this and realize that the negative aspects of our circumstance are a product of our ideals, we might be able to reorient our perspectives and regain meaning, identity, and community in our lives.

## Reorienting Our Perspective

Hershock argues that to combat the loneliness, isolation, and meaninglessness in our lives, we must undergo a “New Copernican Revolution” – a widespread, subtle shift in thought leading to a landslide of monumental change (Hershock, 1999, 110). Just as how in Europe, the concept of a heliocentric solar system dramatically changed society, shifting from our Western perceptions and imperatives could lead to a vast restructuring of our lives. In the spirit of the Copernican Revolution, Hershock invites us to reorient the axis of our thinking. He feels that reorienting our ideals to be more inclusive and improvisational, rather than individualistic and controlling, may provide us with the change we need, and that Buddhism is a source of such ideals.

Buddhist teachings are radically different from their Western counterparts. Buddhism teaches that there is no firm beginning and no apparent end to the universe, and life does not progress in a specific direction – the Lexus need not follow the olive tree. Individual objects are meaningless, and are defined by their relationships. Everything is interdependent, and nothing is individual. No matter what a person faces in her life, she will also face turbulence and suffering. Because all things are interdependent, we are on some level responsible for and able to mitigate our suffering. When one comes to terms with this initially harsh-seeming reality, one can learn to live a life of greater appreciation and deeper meaning (Hershock, 1999, 106-110).

Buddhist teachings offer that suffering is inevitable. In our culture, however, it is perceived as an unfair ordeal to be eliminated. We currently attempt to compartmentalize and control various parts of our suffering, from a sprained ankle with anti-inflammatories to the common cold with symptom relief. In contrast to this approach, Buddhism considers health a property of situations, rather than organs or individuals – we cannot isolate the suffering from the situation. If someone crashes their bicycle and breaks their arm, they not only have an orthopaedic problem, but a lack of mindfulness while riding a bicycle. If a person suffers clinical depression, he has not only the

problem of a chemical imbalance in his brain, but also the life issues leading him to it (Hershock, 1999, 117-118). Since no problem can be truly isolated and eradicated with an individual cure, we need to learn to cope with entire situations.

We can cope with our circumstances by following an old teaching Hershock quotes – “in accord with the situation, respond as needed” (Hershock, 1999, 113). Since the universe is forever changing and our place is always unique, we need to learn to improvise. In accepting that suffering will always come our way, we cannot try to systematically prevent or eliminate it with control; rather, we need to be prepared to accept every novel situation, and respond accordingly. This method is not restricted to coping; by accepting that things will always change, we can make the most of our lives by preparing ourselves for previously unimagined opportunities to appreciate and contribute to our circumstances and each other. We can better ourselves and each other in the best way possible only by accepting the possibility of surprise.

Our betterment also depends heavily on our ability to recognize our interdependence with one another. Buddhism teaches us that we must do this completely, relinquishing our notions of relevant versus irrelevant, of self versus other. Just as we do with loved ones, we must extend our desires and happiness to others without considering ourselves. In what Hershock calls horizonless intimacy, the self becomes the other, and the other becomes the self. Recognizing this level interdependence means foregoing our need for such extreme individualism, but in doing so we do not surrender ourselves to dependence on others – to do so would be to maintain our notions of “self” and “other” (Hershock, 1999, 132-134). Since meaning is rooted in relationships rather than individuals, adopting this new paradigm will ultimately bring more meaning to our lives. Furthermore, adopting this paradigm comes at no cost.

The power of Hershock’s imperative to reorient our consciousness lies in the immediacy and practicality of its undertaking. Some schools of Buddhism even teach that enlightenment is spontaneous in nature. To shed our horizons of relevance and intimacy, and to learn to improvise rather than attempt control our lives, might happen slowly or all at once (Hershock, 1999, 131). Making this subtle change in our thinking must be genuine, not feigned by a strict and scheduled process; it is not necessarily intuitive, but also not out of reach. Hershock is also pragmatic in that he does not endorse the reckless abandonment of technology. He tells us that “trying to jump

off the technological juggernaut now is like trying to jump out of a car at highway speeds” (Hershock, 1999, 271). We cannot simply stop using our cars, shipping food, curing the ill and aiding the needy. We can, however try to change the way we think. If we can re-orient the wheel of our thinking from individualistic and rigid control to improvisation and community, we can shed our horizons of intimacy, and lead lives of true meaning.

## References

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