

Book Review: Technology and the Contested Meaning of Sustainability

Christopher Manes

Christopher Manes is a writer and attorney who lives in Palm Springs, California. He is the author of *Other Creations: Rediscovering the Spirituality of Animals* (Doubleday), and *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization* (Little Brown), which was nominated for a Los Angeles Times book award. He is a contributing writer to *The Wild Earth Journal*, and his articles on environmental and religious themes have appeared in numerous national publications and have been widely anthologized. His e-mail is cmanes@sangerlaw.com.

Book Review: *Technology and the Contested Meaning of Sustainability*
By Aidan Davison. Albany, NY: State of University of New York Press, 2001.
275 pages, notes, index, no bibliography

Postmodern thought is above all else an inquiry into how power-hungry interests battle for control over the way we speak to each other. As Roland Barthes put it, institutions try to impose on us their particular “universe of discourse,” with the goal of making any opposition to their agendas literally unthinkable for lack of an idiom to express disapproval. The tactics are many, but the aim predictably similar: to disguise history (the realm of volition, politics, morality) as nature (the inevitable, disinterested, incontrovertible). To see how ornate the imposture has become, just read such pop-philosophy as Robert Wright’s *Nonzero* or Thomas Friedman’s *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, where global capitalism is lauded as predestined, if not godlike.

Aidan Davison’s *Technology and the Contested Meanings of Sustainability* adds an environmental chord to the postmodern theme. The book meticulously exposes how the language of sustainable development has been co-opted by business and other interests with an agenda of limitless technological growth at the expense of wild nature and most people on the planet.

In fact, Davison argues that the rhetoric of sustainability has been completely turned on its head, becoming the primary language used to justify the juggernaut of development. As the discourse of sustainability is used today, it swamps issues of how we can learn to dwell harmoniously in nature with an end-

less liturgy of technocratic solutions to environmental “problems.” It brazenly champions developmentalism as the highest form of environmentalism.

This is an important critique, one that should be taken to heart by committed environmentalists, who Davison suggests may be naively employing a confused discourse that precludes a clear understanding of the environmental crisis. And if this were Davison’s only task, the book would be interesting enough. But the author does a great deal more. Davison uses the ambiguous status of sustainability as a point of departure into a broader examination of the role technology plays in modern culture and its assault on nature. For Davison, to confront the environmental crisis requires changing how we live, which ultimately means changing how we think about technology. Indeed, his point is that the recent ascendancy of sustainability in environmental discourse arises from an impoverished understanding of the way technology conditions how we live and the kind of people we are.

To shed light on the relationship between the modern self and technology, Davison takes as his text Martin Heidegger’s writings on technology, in particular, the seminal essay “The Question Concerning Technology.” For those of us who have found Heidegger useful, if not indispensable, to understanding modernity’s dysfunctional relationship with nature, Davison’s commentary chisels new facets into Heidegger’s thinking, not always with flattering results. He develops Heidegger’s key insight that technology is not an accumulation of machinery or even techniques for altering nature, but rather a relationship between us and our world. Modern technology is not simply changing the material condition of our existence at breakneck speed, but more importantly it is changing how we experience our world. Yet Davison also claims that Heidegger’s nostalgia for his pastoral youth led his thinking into a false, or at least irrelevant, distinction between what the philosopher saw as the old, humane, poetic technologies of craft, and the new global technologies that convert the earth into pure resource for human use. According to Davison, a reactionary strain in Heidegger’s thought prevented him from confronting technology in a way that was as “philosophically rich” as it needs to be for us to contest the logic of instrumentality in our everyday lives.

One can take issue with Davison’s critique of Heidegger (for a completely different perspective on Heidegger’s importance to ecological thought, see Michael Zimmerman’s various articles on the subject). Heidegger urged that, due to the very danger that modern technology presents by creating an increasingly incoherent world, it represents an epic opportunity for modern people to experience the need they have for a deeper, more poetic relationship with the earth, one that will — in his splendid phrase — let Being be (even more splendid as “*Laß das Sein sein*,” in the original German). Davison’s objections to the contrary, Heidegger does in fact appear to make a cogent distinction between craft and modern technology, between a way of existence represented by wooden windmills as opposed to power plants (to use the example Davison

discusses from “The Question Concerning Technology”). Furthermore, this distinction seems to accord with everyday experience, not mere nostalgia: power plants raise issues of the domination of nature with us, in terms of pollution, integration with central authority, sheer ugliness, while windmills do not and, historically, never did. More to the point, Davison’s dismissal of those who view modern technology as inherently bad, a la Heidegger, remains ill-defined. Why isn’t it possible that modern technology, due to its ubiquity if nothing else, is irredeemably inimical and worthy of simple scorn? Quantity has not only a quality all its own, but an ontology all its own. I for one have no problem saying nuclear power plants are bad in fundamental ways that windmills are not, leaving aside the issue of whether I’d want a windmill in this or that particular place. This is all the more true when a small, elite class siphons off most of the benefits of pervasive technology, while passing the detriments on to the rest of us. In short, many readers may feel that Davison’s “philosophically rich” approach to technology lets it (and the class of people who benefit most from it) off the hook too easily.

However that may be, Davison’s dialog with Heidegger is a tour de force of insightful thinking, bringing out contours in Heidegger’s thinking that many of us might not have discerned before. For Davison, the issue is not old vs. new technology, *techne* vs. *poiesis*, but the dual, almost duplicitous, nature of discourse surrounding technology. Davison convincingly shows that we experience technology as a vibrant foreground of issues and concerns generating garrulous debates about cloning or pollution or nuclear power while, meantime, the material culture of technology moves ever onward in a vast amoral background abandoned to a language of pure technique and instrumentality. And it is this background that intersects intimately with our daily lives and radically changes them. We complain about smog from cars, argue over legislation, and develop new emission standards to “fix” the problem without anyone much noticing that the introduction of the automobile utterly transformed the shape of our cities, our homes, the way we work, eat, buy goods, relate to our children, experience music, and, in many cases, die. The entire landscape of the continent is now dominated by roads for the benefit of this single technological development. Bringing to the fore this morally silent background, where technology relentlessly alters who we are, free from any resistance by an ethical discourse, is, according to Davison, the key to restoring our world from its present moral incoherence to meaning.

He points out, again convincingly, that it is this foreground/background structure of technology that has alienated our practices so completely from our beliefs, making our strongest moral convictions ultimately effete. “We debate the merits of abortion over a plate of fried eggs from factory chickens ,” he writes, “being careful not to stain clothes that in all probability were produced through the ravages of industrial cotton farming and Southern factory labor” (p. 175).

The description captures the dilemma activists and people concerned about the

environment constantly face in a world where our moral loquaciousness seems to drift ethereally over the blunt, unfazed machinery of our everyday consumerism and its concrete instrumental discourse. Davison has gone a long way to explain why this is.

Davison's response to the dual nature of technology, involving what he calls practicing "sustaining technologies," attempts to introduce play, grace, and care into the personal realms of our practical lives now dominated by the logic of instrumentality. Davison humbly terms these attempts "experiments," and makes no pretense to their universality or emancipatory efficacy. On the contrary, what he suggests sounds very much like Michel Foucault's "nodes of resistance," localized, ever-shifting opportunities to resist and destabilize the power of institutions and their discourse that dominate our lives. (It is, in fact, somewhat strange that Davison's book never mentions Foucault at all, since so many of Foucault's ideas — such as technologies of the self — seem to dovetail with Davison's theme.)

Again, one can take issue with Davison's conclusions. Many readers will perhaps see his sustaining technologies as nothing other than a species of reformism that blunts revolutionary change. For all his delightful debunking of the pom-pom girls of global capitalism, he says very little about class, which is closely related to the distribution of technology and its nastier side-effects. Indeed, while Davison insightfully discusses how the technology of conveniences, like cell phones, condition how we exist, noticeably lacking from the book is any discussion of the technologies of production (sweatshop sewing machines, office computer networks, restaurant microwaves), which dominate the everyday existence of billions of people. The book is sadly silent on how labour itself can be rescued from the logic of means, which surely is more relevant to most people than the anti-social consequences of internet surfing or advanced telecommunications. One could vigorously respond to Davison that before we can make technology moral, we may have to first wrest control of it from the elite that disproportionately benefits from a certain kind of technological development, one that is centralized, complex, interconnected, mass produced, and profitable.

But one epiphany at a time, I guess. In fairness, Davison takes care not to rule out other ways of counteracting the moral incoherence of technology, and positively urges his readers to seek out their own methods of resistance. *Technology and the Contested Meanings of Sustainability* succeeds at what truly important books do: it does not offer final answers, but rather insights that redefine the issues. For all of us concerned with the environmental and human crisis of modernity, Davison's careful thinking about technology points the way to important new questions.

Christopher Manes