

17B BORGMANN AND TECHNOLOGY

Introduction

Who is Albert Borgmann?

Albert Borgmann (1937-2023) was professor of philosophy at the University of Montana, specializing in the philosophy of technology. His later works examined the effect of technology on Christianity in America.

His primary books were:

Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life

Crossing the Postmodern Divide

Holding on to Reality

Power Failure

Borgmann described technology as “the form of life that is characteristic of an advanced society.”

Technology, always short for “modern technology,” is a distinctive way of taking up with reality and results in characteristic artifacts, large and small. It is a unique convergence and configuration of scientific, economic, and cultural factors. [1]

Proponents of technology primarily, suggested Borgmann, made enormous promises (the creation of a new “self,” free, autonomous, unencumbered, possessing whatever it desired) that it could never deliver. Technology, in fact, moved us further away from our true humanity.

Technology promises to bring the forces of nature and culture under control, to liberate us from misery and toil, and to enrich our lives...[More accurately], implied in the technological mode of taking up with the world there is a promise that this approach to reality will, by way of the domination of nature, yield liberation and enrichment. [2]

Borgmann was a critic of unbridled technology, observing the dehumanizing effects of a world focused on machines and the “forward force of technology”:

Technology entered the mainstream of Europe at the time of the Industrial Revolution. At this juncture human ingenuity collided with human sinfulness. Innovation, production, and economic growth were coupled with greed, mistreatment of employees, and callous disregard for the environment. If the Newtonian Scientific Revolution made people think that the universe was a machine, the Industrial Revolution showed many that they were merely cogs in a machine ...

The main goal of these programs seems to be the domination of nature. But we must be more precise. The desire to dominate does not just spring from a lust of power, from sheer human imperialism. It is from the start connected with the aim of liberating humanity from disease,

hunger, and toil, and of enriching life with learning, art, and athletics. Descartes says further of his project just quoted: "This would not only be desirable in bringing about the invention of an infinity of devices to enable us to enjoy the fruits of agriculture and all the wealth of the earth without labor, but even more so in conserving health, the principle good and the basis of all other goods this life." ...

Relief became possible from the drudgery of threshing wheat, digging dirt, carrying water, breaking rocks, sawing wood, washing clothes, and indoors, spinning and weaving and sewing; many of the laborious tasks of living were being made easier by the middle of the 19th century. Relief from toil does not necessarily mean a better higher life; nevertheless, any attempt to get at the meaning of American technology must give a prominent place to machines that have lifted burdens from the shoulders of millions of individual human beings. [3]

Borgmann regularly critiqued the effects of technology, emphasizing two aspects that he developed, the device paradigm and focal things.

Device Paradigm

In his 1984 book *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* philosopher Albert Borgmann developed the concept of the "device paradigm":

As technology advances and becomes more complex we actually become more distant from it. We don't understand how it works, and we can't keep it going by ourselves.

*Borgmann proposes that we think about technology in terms of what he calls **the device paradigm**. A device is something that procures for us a commodity (goods or services) without demanding any skill or attention of us. For example, a stereo provides the commodity of music without our having to know how it works, as opposed to playing a musical instrument which requires knowledge, practice and effort. The more sophisticated the device, the more incomprehensible and concealed from our view is its mechanism...*

The more technology advances, the less aware we are of its background (the mechanics of how it works and the political and economic conditions under which it operates) when we consume its commodities. Commodities become disconnected from their contexts. Borgmann gives the example of TV dinners which are prepared instantly and eaten in a hurry without any depth; the fellowship of kitchen and table are missing, which subtracts from the meaning of the meal.

The promise of technology – that it would provide freedom from hardship, disease, and toil – has not materialized unambiguously. New freedoms are offset by increased burdens elsewhere. The benefits of technology are unjustly distributed. Perhaps the promise is too vague and not worth keeping. It results in the pursuit of "frivolous comfort." What was meant to give liberation and enrichment yields instead disengagement, distraction, and loneliness. [4]

(B)orgmann builds his theory from a descriptive phenomenological account. He takes up his field of inquiry with a description of the shift from "things" to "devices," from fireplaces to central heating, from candles to sophisticated lighting systems, from wooden tables to Formica,

from traditional foods and drinks to Lite versions, from shoelaces to Velcro, from craftwork to automation, from traditional performances and physical activities to home entertainment centers. For Borgmann these substitutions constitute a repeated pattern that can be described, a pattern that Borgmann claims also has repeated consequences (which can be similarly described) for our relationships to our physical surroundings, our relationships to ourselves and others. [5]

Borgmann wrote-

What the instrumentalist fails to see is that we live in a world that is patterned after the device paradigm, a life where we pay our dues to the machinery of the device through labor and where in our leisure time we surrender to the diversions of commodities. We value work because it is, more so than citizenship or education, the crucial certificate of membership in this society. We value leisure because it is still ringing with the echoes of liberty, prosperity, and self-realization. But we sense at a deeper level that a life divided between labor that is not fulfilling and leisure that is not ennobling is not worth living. [6]

Focal Things-

*Another problem is disorientation. In pretechnological society, one oriented oneself by reference to the sun. Today we have nothing around which to orient ourselves. We have lost what Borgmann calls **focal things and practices**. A focal practice is an activity which "can center and illuminate our lives...a regular and skillful engagement of body and mind." (4) Playing a musical instrument is a prime example. A focal thing is something which is used in a focal practice, such as a violin. The promise of technology causes us to trade focal things for commodities and engagement in focal practices for diversion. We are left feeling a sense of loss and betrayal of the traditions to which we are indebted. [7]*

Power Failure

Borgmann's most Christian book was his 2003 *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology*. [8] He notes that while technology is booming, church attendance and Christian influence is declining. He calls for a return to the basics of the faith: Bible reading, prayer, times of quiet, compassion for the poor.

We are doing very well. But Christianity is not. All indications are that, as the standard of living rises, faith declines. The population of the richest among the first world countries shows the least belief in God and in life after death and has the lowest church attendance. It also seems that religious convictions decrease as the level of education increases. This country is to some degree an exception, but church membership and church attendance in the United States have also been declining. And here, too, the more affluent and better educated are less religious.

This, too, suggests that there is a connection between the progress of technology and the decline of faith. Most obviously the progress of technology seems to render Christianity superfluous and irrelevant. [9]

To begin with the straightforward expansion of technology, it is the hope of both advocates and critics that a dramatic enlargement of the rule of technology will disclose its secular significance. The advocates believe that technological enterprise has yet to reach its full flowering, that technological invention will procure unprecedented prosperity and liberty, and that in the fullness of time technology will disclose the every reasonable person its overwhelmingly beneficial and gratifying character. Every technological innovation is hailed as the final stride toward that universally rich and satisfying life. [10]

Technology ought to be revoked as the dominant way of taking up with the world and relegated to securing the margins and underpinnings of our lives. Within that environment we must make a clearing for the celebration of the Word of God. But since technology as a way of life is so pervasive, so well entrenched, and so concealed in its quotidianity, Christians must meet the rule of technology with a deliberate and regular counterpractice ...

Therefore a radical theology of technology must finally become a practical theology, one that first makes room and then makes way for a Christian practice. Here we must consider again the ancient senses of theology, the senses that extend from reflection to prayer. We must also recover that ascetic tradition of practice and discipline and ask how the asceticism of being still and solitary in meditation is related to the practice of being communally engaged in the breaking of the bread. The passage through technology discloses a new or an ancient splendor in asceticism. There is no duress of denial in ascetic Christianity. On the contrary, liberating us from the indolence and shallowness of technology, it opens to us the festive engagement with life. [11]

It is not that the affluent are uninformed of the bitterness of brute poverty, nor is it the cause that the rich, though informed, are economically unable to help. Rather we must assume that they are suffering from an incapacity to be moved by misery. And that incapacity, I want to urge, is a feature of advanced poverty. Thus brute poverty points us to advanced poverty in two ways. First, the religious inconclusiveness of brute poverty and its normal supersession by advanced poverty suggest that if there is today a decisive setting for the advent of the Gospel's good news, it must be advanced poverty. And second, if there is to be any hope for a vigorous and imminent attack on brute poverty, it hinges on our ability to open up in advanced poverty a sense of compassion and readiness to share. [12]

Borgmann's solution: Proper use of technology

The opposite of modern technology is not a return to primitive technology but rather an emphasis on human participation in "focal activities" such as communication, cooking, and recreation.

Borgmann suggests that technology can open new perspectives if viewed properly. As long as we overlook the tightly patterned character of technology and believe that we live in a world of endlessly open and rich opportunities, as long as we ignore the definite ways in which

we, acting technologically, have worked out the promise of technology and remain vaguely enthralled by that promise, so long simple things and practices will seem burdensome, confining, and drab. But if we recognize the central vacuity of advanced technology, that emptiness can become the opening for focal things. It works both ways, of course. When we see a focal concern of ours threatened by technology, our sight for the liabilities of mature technology is sharpened.' ...

Philosopher Albert Borgmann writes that "technology advances and is sustained by regardless power". "Regardless power" refers to the fact that technology, at least in theory, always works regardless of the situation it is embedded in or the particular humans who are using it. Borgmann says a more "careful power" is called for in the use of technology, a restrained use of power that fosters creaturely relationships and improves difficult circumstances. A careful use of technological power will strive to bring its future development and consumption in line with the biblical principles of the Beatitudes, where humility, peacemaking, mercy, and purity of heart are valued over selfishness, conflict, ruthlessness, and greed. [13]

References

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