Violence and Technology

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Violence and Technology

The first part of this topic seems to assume a great deal—that technology causes violence. The implied assumption seems to be that the more technological a society, the more prone it is to violence. I would contend that this is a reasonable assumption. We are well along the road to being the foremost industrialized society on this planet, and "law and order" is a topic uppermost in our minds. It is certainly one of the major issues of the current Presidential campaign. Coupled with the propensity of people to view life from their own parochial vantage point, the mass media has brought before our very eyes the simple fact that the streets of America's major cities are no longer safe; it has shown on instant replay such exciting events as political assassinations, urban riots, 1972 Olympic kidnappings, military combat and campus disorders. Other countries besides the United States have witnessed rising crime statistics as they move away from an agrarian base and toward an industrialized social structure. The level of violence varies, however, and in some societies it is considerably less than others. The reasons for this variance are hard to ascertain; but, I suspect, those reasons are of crucial importance if we are to fathom this subject.

For Americans the crime news is quite bitter because it shows a significant and steady increase in the past 25 years with some ebbing now and again, but with an average gain of 15% a year. Violent crimes rose at a more rapid rate (17%) than crime against property, a less propitious (9%) rate. Over the past decade the American crime rate rose 148%; the population rose but 10%.

Critics find that such statistics should not be trusted. Some feel
the statistics gathered and released solely by the F.B.I. are played down when they show a distressingly sharp upbeat. Others counter such accusations by stating that the gatherers of crime information prejudice the process by overrating and double counting. The whole question of statistical gathering is a legitimate topic to investigate. Even the 1969 staff report on "Crimes of Violence" acknowledged that crime figures should be viewed cautiously. Based on voluntary disclosures by local police, these statistics are imperfect measures of the actual levels and trends of violent crimes in the United States.

However, the sad fact of life is that given the gap that exists between the reported figures and true figures, and the attendant problems of dealing with statistics, in all probability, there is some substance to the contention that the true rate of major violent crimes as well as serious property crimes is twice as high as the reported rate.

One does not want to get bogged down arguing how rapid the water is seeping into the boat. An overview of the situation is that the rate of violent crime is increasing faster than the population growth rate and has been since the turn of the century and the future trend is unmistakably foreboding.

Technology has demonstrated its proclivity (in all industrializing societies) to alter the culture of a society so that violence does increase. The reasons for this cause and effect relationship vary. However, consider the members of a Puerto Rican family who had lived in a small rural village with a close, intimate social structure virtually unchanged over the past century. Then, abruptly, move that family via a Pan American jet to the whirling, aggressive, cut-throat competitive environment of New York City's garment district where the mother, father and oldest children have found employment. The leap from the lazy, placid, rural countryside of Puerto Rico to the bustling, teeming city of New York represents one of man's most ambitious and unpredictable adventures—the poorly understood process of cultural evolution know as "acculturation." This process includes not only the process of contact between differing cultures, but also the infinite range of social results such as assimilation, rejection and disorganization. The attendant feelings of depression, frustration, alienation and increased violence are an all too familiar a pattern for those who try to make the leap. The social controls that proved workable in the old setting are no longer relevant in the new cultural setting. Even a casual observer can understand the difficulties of adjusting to such cultural differences that a new, bewildering, New York City presents to the Puerto Rican family.

Today, those of us who have been brought up in an industrialized

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modern society can and should consider ourselves changing natives, better able to cope with acculturation than most, but still not that comfortable with the process. Although we may feel a greater familiarity with the technological terrain than the newly arrived Puerto Rican family, we are in the midst of the rapid cultural change and stand on the threshold of a new culture. Much of this change is due to the technologies that have been and will be unleashed. The future holds much that is unpredictable. Even those who would dare to dream of what this future might be, as Allen Toffler has done in *Future Shock*, have hardly the foggiest idea of how accurate their predictions are apt to be. The incredible promise (or is it threat?) is that what science and technology are likely to realize within a few decades is apt to be dramatic and almost unpredictable. One thing is for sure, however. Our own acculturation to technological advances is among the most meaningful and personally vital tasks of our time. Acculturation will occur. The question is whether it will harmonize with man's vital interests. Ever more people are answering this question in a pessimistic manner, especially when they view the area of violence and see it increasing at an accelerated rate as the changes in our society also accelerate. The culprit seems to be change: Not the slow evolutionary type of change where people have time to adjust, but the more rapid change brought on by constant alterations due to technology. The human lag in adjusting to rapid change is causing increased tension which all too frequently manifests itself in a severe form of anxiety—violence.

There is a long history of thought in this area. The societal tensions that accompany the western industrial revolution were interrupted by both optimistic and pessimistic thinkers of those times in ways roughly analogous to the thinkers we hear today. One can trace the view of technology as a utopian force to such 19th-century philosophers as Karl Marx and Auguste Comte. On the other side, one may cite numerous critics of machine technology including Thomas Carlyle who wrote of “An Age of Machinery, in Every Inward and Outward Sense of the Word,” the poet Matthew Arnold; and even Mark Twain, who late in his life offered a little-known essay entitled “Man A Machine?” Among those whose fear of, and resistance to, technological change impelled them to action were a considerable number of English workers known as Luddites, who in the early 19th century gained wide repute by smashing the machines they hated in a series of riots. The violence of these riots was caused by the societal ramifications of technological innovations, namely, unemployment.

Another interesting and more optimistic of our contemporary thinkers is Marshall McLuhan, who sees technology as the prime mover behind all social change but does little to concern himself with where technology is leading. His book *Understanding Media* presents a theme that places the content of a discussion over technology in
moral neutrality. It is the changes produced in ourselves that are important. His cry is not that of great alarm. On the other side, the pessimistic writings of men like Herbert Marcuse view the technological system as creating in individuals "false needs" which serve to sustain the system while repressing true human needs. Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* is a major work of contemporary philosophy which concludes that the technological state is basically totalitarian and violent. From the inside, it appears completely rational; but from the outside, one can see that it is totally irrational since it excludes qualitative social change.

Whether you subscribe to such notions or not, it is unmistakably true that today, and increasingly in the future, the social processes will become so complex, so interrelated and so tied up in scientific technological developments, that the average collective mind of mankind will be more baffled, confused and, consequently, unresponsive. Frustration and cynicism are building and violence is mounting. In ages past, before rapid technological innovation, the social processes were relatively clear. Value structures were understood and generally accepted. Power usually rested in the hands of a small oligarchy via the state, the church or the military. People knew who their rulers were, what they were doing and why. For the industrialized nations, this era has passed. Today, people are not sure what is happening, or why. It is one of the paradoxes of the modern age that more and more people, generally less knowledgeable, are encouraged to participate in the decision-making process. Ironically, at the same time, the problems of modern industrialized society are growing in complexity and will, in all probability, be understood by few people. How does this technological force square with the social trend toward participatory democracy? The answer is, it doesn't, and the ramifications of this dichotomy are very apt to lend to more violence.

The unprecedented state of chaos, confusion and violence we see are not only a result of our rapid change, but also the result of our psychological failing to grow up to this change. In our medicine, our science, our technology we make rapid strides to adapt ourselves to new techniques and solutions. But in our thinking, our feeling, our accommodation to social, political, cultural and economic problems, we remain enslaved to tribal memories. We may physically leave a pastoral setting such as Puerto Rico, but the cultural changes that are necessary for our existence and survival in a constantly changing technological society suffer from a cultural lag. This is no less true for those of us who have grown up in a technological setting. Only the magnitude of the impact varies. Dislocations appear everywhere—generation gaps, credibility gaps, gaps between rich and poor, male and female. It is hard and painful to grow up individually. It is even harder and more painful for a whole society to grow up, especially
when you don’t know what you are growing up to. The guideposts for social interaction and human behavior are ruptured while at the same time, people are expected without difficulty to throw off early prejudices and preconceptions, to take a realistic look at what is happening in the world. Unless we can control and subdue the obsolete influences of the past, we shall have less and less control over the future. Ironically, we are less sure of exactly what needs to be subdued and what needs to be retained, for we are not sure what tools will be needed in the future as the future remains primarily a mystery. If this seems like a vicious cycle, it is. This does not mean we are in short supply of soothsayers. There are many who offer simplistic answers. However, no simplistic answer will solve the predicament of knowing what traditions to keep on our perilous future voyage, especially when we have no exact notion of what our future needs are to be.

One thing is quite evident: For the first time in our global history, man has the technology, the energy, the knowledge and the resources to unify the human race, to feed everyone, to provide all with at least the basic necessities of life. Yet, while all this is possible on the technological and intellectual fronts, precisely the opposite is happening on the political, social and the emotional fronts. The world's technological hardware is fast outstripping the average mental powers of society to cope. All trends seem to indicate that only a small elite minority will be able to understand the processes by which the human population is maintained. And if these processes cannot be understood by the average man, how can the society make any rational and democratic decisions on basic matters? The whole issue of whether a democracy can survive in an age of dramatic and kaleidoscopic change where more control becomes imperative is a major question that must be tackled. In all probability, democracy will come under attack as being an inadequate means of governing mass, technological society. Personally, I wish to resist this snobbish elitist notion from the start, but I fear for the future attack that is to be made on democracy.

More recently a growing number of people are not so sure this technological revolution truly represents progress. More pessimistic philosophies seem to be emerging. The same fossil fuels that launched the industrial revolution are choking people and plants to death; the same agricultural chemicals that enabled a small and shrinking percentage of our population to feed the rest of us are beginning to show up in some odd places with strange effects; modern plumbing has merely delivered the waste of the city dweller to the streams and beaches of his country neighbors; weaponry has been created with such destructive force that global annihilation is a very real possibility.

The technologically created affluence has, to many people, brought poison instead of milk and honey, slavery instead of freedom, violence instead of brotherhood.
What people are beginning to realize is that technology can be a two-edged sword cutting against social benefit as well as for it. Now being perceived with considerably more clarity is the fact that technological achievements have been associated with and have considerable impact on social organizational systems of comparable complexity and sophistication.

The idolatry of technology may be becoming a bit tarnished, but the tendency is still to deify, to regard technology as an almost sentient agency in society with a will of its own, imposing its methods and mechanisms on at best a passive and at worst an unwilling mankind. There is a widespread feeling today that technology is, in fact, an autonomous force largely out of control, and that the problem, therefore, is primarily one of gaining control. Yet, the instruments for control do not yet seem to be devised. The flywheel of technology has a self-perpetuating momentum of its own, causing a frightening spin-off that vastly affects the social scene and, because of its huge impact, contributes heavily to social instability and the accompanying heightened tempo of violence.

The American people are in trouble today not just because of the severity of their problem, but because the yardstick for measuring and dealing with change is breaking down. The need for change is not the sole issue. The main issue is that too few are willing to stand by any governing principles having to do with change. The results are a bumbling amateurism in dealing with historical processes.

Passion is a valuable ingredient of change, but if it is detached altogether from knowledge and the making of objective judgments, the result is likely to be a bloodily spew. Conflicting and competing claims on the public attention for support are as natural as claims on the public treasury, but these claims become random and explosive in the absence of a responsible basis for evaluating them and fitting them into the essential business of the whole community.

Kaleidoscopic change, due mainly to technology, has caused a never-ending series of social reverberations which have displaced our value structure. The problem of acculturation is enormous because we no longer know what values are appropriate to deal with change.

So long as excuses are made for excesses, there will be a multiplication of excesses and a shrinkage in the chances for any basic upgrading in the human situation. The trouble with "burn, baby, burn," as an ideology is that babies do get burned. The slaughter of the innocent is what happens when know-nothingness and vengeance converge.

The oldest political truth is that the only ultimate protection against generalized violence is the particularized pursuit of justice. The nation must therefore fix its main attention and energies on responsible and effective ways of dealing with the grievances and dreams.
of its people. This difficult task is compounded by the continual alteration that technology wroughts on a society. Society must not be deflected from this purpose by those who attach fuses to those grievances or dreams. Nor can it grant special dispensation for violence to any of its members. Until a system of values is created that will allow social justice to be obtained and held, technology will continue to play havoc with the social structure and violence will abound. Eventually, if unchecked, lack of an ethical basis will, in all probability, lead to a massive blood bath. A non-violent responsible society cannot exist without standards any more than it can advance without goals. The standards once achieved must be applied with understanding and compassion but first there must be an acceptable base that is not continuously changing.

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A test pilot, radioing to his control tower:  
"I'm lost, but I'm making record time."

The vast successes of technology in the United States have produced a society in which techniques or the means is more important, often, than the end product or goal. The artist reflects this dominance by portraying in his work the products of technology or by emphasizing the creative act for its own sake. In either case, the art created tends to have violence as its subject matter or it is in some way violent itself.

The limits of my study are the works of five major writers and painters active during the years 1920-1960: Nathaniel West, Stuart Davis, Joseph Heller, Ernest Hemingway, and Jackson Pollock. This is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of American artistic endeavor during this period; I am sure that other writers and painters will occur to you that would fit into this study. In fact, I would count that as a measure of its success. My conclusions today must be regarded as explorations in a vast but exciting area of American culture. And in an age when we emphasize the vernacular, the art of the people, pop culture if you will, I am probably treading on dangerous ground by limiting myself to the products of "high culture." But as the song says—"Let it be." There is plenty of work for everyone.

Ed. note: This article is an abridgment of the original paper which was nearly twice as long and included 35mm slides.
American artists of the period 1920-1960 have responded both directly and indirectly to their technological environment. By "direct response," I am thinking of the artist's use of the technological world as subject matter. Nathaniel West, in Miss Lonelyhearts (1933), portrayed the results of applying technology to the solution of human problems—systematized counselling. A New York newspaper publishes an advice column, under the signature of Miss Lonelyhearts, and the columnist, whom we know only as Miss Lonelyhearts, an indication that only his technological identity is of any importance, experiences the excruciating and frustrating difficulty of dealing with human problems in this mechanical way. The syndicated, systematized, technologically inspired solution to human problems is far from adequate. It does not relieve the suffering of the correspondents and it only creates an intolerable anxiety in the sensitive columnist.

The painter Stuart Davis was perhaps more confident in his treatment of the technological world. The semi-abstract, mechanical world in his paintings is well known. Not so well known is his propensity for systematization, for technology. His notes for the preparation of the big murals of 1939 and 1940 demonstrate his desire to systematize the creative process. The resultant art is clean, mechanical, animated, nervous, sometimes humorous, usually forceful. He was totally committed to the creative act, which was necessarily for him quite subjective. The creative act results in constructive order, which he insisted was not merely subjective but external and universal.

Joseph Heller, in Catch-22 (1955-1961), portrayed the world of Milo Minderbinder's technology. In what is otherwise largely an insane world, Milo's methods are seen as relatively rational. He uses the technological monster, the B-17 war machine, for distribution of goods that are the basis of his eminently profitable enterprise. He is the apostle of applied technology as well as the provider of fresh eggs—corporation eggs—for the mess halls.

These three artists portrayed technology in urban America (West), in a relatively abstract, indeterminant world (Davis), and in a wartime environment (Heller). Each artist shows the influence of technology by dealing with it directly, as the subject matter of his art.

A more indirect response to technology is represented by Ernest Hemingway and Jackson Pollock. Both of these artists emphasized the essence of technology—ordered action as an end in itself. In Hemingway's work, action is all. In In Our Time (1925), he described his world just before, during, and after World War I. In this world, tradi-

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2 Paintings by Davis used as illustration: Hot Still Scape for Six Colors (1940); Report from Rockport (1940); Ursine Park (1942).

tion was inverted; disorder was the rule. The only solid ground his characters have to stand on is the pure act. Only action that is unencumbered with false principles (what he calls in *A Farewell to Arms* "obscene abstractions") can be creative. The order achieved in "Big Two-Hearted River" is limited to simple action, on the lowest level. Nick enjoys the act of cooking and of fishing, with no apparent more lasting end. This is comparable to the deification of technology, the system, the means to an end. Call it *coping*, if you will. And if this is what the good life consists of—mere coping—then Herbert Muller may be quite correct in labeling our conception of the good life as generally *paltry*.4

Jackson Pollock, in his paintings, demonstrated a similar commitment to action, but with Pollock it was the creative act that was of primary importance. The *process* of painting, the *action* of painting, is primary. (Hence the phrase *action painting.*) "My painting does not come from the easel. I hardly ever stretch my canvas before painting. I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or floor. I need the resistance of a hard surface. On the floor I can walk round it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting."5

Thus, the artist may directly portray the technological world in his art, as in the case of West, Davis, and Heller. Or he may respond indirectly with emphasis upon the essence of technology: ordered action for its own sake, as is evident in the work of Hemingway and Pollock.

But the next question is: given this description of the influence of technology, does the art itself turn out to be violent? [Let us use this definition of violence: narrowly, "behavior designed to inflict physical injury to people or damage to property,"6 or more generally, destructive acts. A secondary, but quite common usage of the term is to denote the application of severe force or merely frenetic activity, in neither case necessarily destructive.]

The art of the three writers in this study is characterized by violence (i.e., destructive acts). Hemingway's *In Our Time* portrays violence both in wartime situations and in peacetime. In "The Battler," a story of peacetime, Nick Adams happens upon two apparent hoboes, one an ex-prizefighter, Ad Francis, and the other, a Negro named Bugs. Nick inadvertently annoys Ad, enough to cause Ad to begin to gather his strength to start punching Nick. But Ad's friend

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5 Paintings by Pollock used as illustration: *One* (1950) and *Lavender Mist*, (1950).
and caretaker intervenes, by cracking him on the head with a black jack, "to change him when he gets that way." This episode demonstrates the violence as well as the inversion of the relationship between the fighter Ad Francis and his friend Bugs. Bugs handles Ad as if he were the operator of a machine. And "operation" is all; there is nothing beyond that for Bugs. But Bugs is kind and considerate. There is a feeling of brotherhood here. But the point is that the idea of the good life is so "paltry." Ad Francis will not be cured; his daily existence will be tolerable; Ad and Bugs will cope.

Nathaniel West's Miss Lonelyhearts portrays the violence that results when other means fail for Miss Lonelyhearts, in his quest for order in his life. When he cannot get through to Betty, he forces a kiss, he shouts at her, he tugs roughly at her nipple, he threatens her. After all this, Betty says to him: "What's the matter? . . . Are you sick?" For Miss Lonelyhearts, violence is a refrain that must keep returning, because no other action is effective, no other action communicates.

Joseph Heller's Catch-22 portrays the meaningless violence of war. Values are inverted in such a way that the commercial necessities of Milo's corporation dictate the operation of the war itself. The ultimate inversion of values occurs when Milo arranges (for the good of the corporation) to have an American base bombed, by the corporation bombers.

Other products of these artists portray severe force, or frenetic activity, not necessarily destructive, but labeled commonly as violent action. Stuart Davis' paintings of around 1940, and indeed nearly all of his later work, demonstrate the vigorous organization of what appear to be machine-made parts. There is a felt unity in his paintings, but also the tension of a contained potential explosion, as if the components of the paintings are about to burst apart.

Jackson Pollock's paintings of 1950 are violent in their very execution. "When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about." Still, even with this emphasis upon the act of painting itself, comparable to the emphasis in the technological world upon the technique, the process, the means, there is for Pollock a goal beyond the painting act. "When I am painting, I have a general

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7 Ernest Hemingway, In Our Time (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), p. 76.
8 West, p. 12.
notion as to what I am about. I can control the flow of paint: there is no accident, just as there is no beginning and no end.”

From this view of the work of certain selected major American artists, work clustered roughly around the years 1930, 1940, and 1950, it is apparent that the artist was affected by technology, and more often than not one of the results of this influence was violence in the art. The two painters, Davis and Pollock, reflect a violence in their abstractions, non-destructive, to be sure, but still potentially explosive. And the three writers, Hemingway, West, and Heller, deal directly with violence as subject matter. Hemingway seems at first to have an answer in the devotion to the simple, creative act, nearly existential, if you will, but this may not be sufficient in the end. It certainly is not for Miss Lonelyhearts in West’s novel; Miss Lonelyhearts, in his role as “humanity lover,” tries to go far beyond the level of simple existentialism, but is frustrated finally, and dies a violent death. And there cannot really be much hope for Yossarian in Catch-22, another humanity-lover, who finally has to try to escape to Sweden, in the manner of Orr, because he is repeatedly blocked in his attempts to impose his reason and humanness upon a mad, violent world.

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10 From the narration by the artist for the film Jackson Pollock, 1951, made by Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg; quoted in Robertson, p. 194.