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Research article

Kafka and Technocratic Reality

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to identify the main themes of Franz Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony" in the light of the emerging philosophy of technology contemporary to him. The basis of the analysis is a comparative perspective on the literary fiction and philosophical programs that are united by the same theme and problematics. On the eve of the First World War, questions about the pragmatics and teleology of the rapid development of technology became relevant, also about the consequences of its incorporation into the very fabric of culture, and about the increase of its manipulative possibilities in the control of the natural order. The growing power of the machine, of the soulless apparatus, is realized as a great civilizational problem, which both "philosophical engineers" and their critics are trying to solve, which is realized both in the forms of philosophical discourse and in artistic works. The first experiments in the philosophy of engineering include the works of Ernst Kapp, Thorstein Veblen, Peter Engelmeier, Friedrich Dessauer, Eberhard Zschimmer, Oswald Spengler, Georg Simmel, and later Boris Vysheslavtsev. The literary works of writers also appear which reflect the problematics related to the affirmation of technology and engineering in culture. Franz Kafka's short story "In the Penal Colony" reflects many themes that are part of the tradition of the philosophy of technology, not only among Kafka's contemporary philosophizing engineers on the eve of World War I, but throughout the 20th century. These include the technocratic tendencies of the "idle class," the ideals of the technocratic order; the ethical problems associated with the introduction of machines into the body of culture; and the possibility of a harmonious interaction between the social and technical worlds. The article analyzes some of the issues contained in Kafka's story in the light of the emerging field of humanitarian knowledge – philosophy of technology.

Keywords: Technology; Engineering profession; Kafka; Philosophizing Engineers and Philosophers of technology

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Научная статья

Кафка и технократическая реальность

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Аннотация

Цель статьи – выявить основные темы рассказа Франца Кафки “В исправительной колонии” в свете современной ему нарождающейся философии техники. Сравнительный анализ художественного текста и философских программ, объединенных одной тематикой и проблематикой, является основой аналитики статьи. Накануне Первой Мировой войны актуальными становятся вопросы о прагматике и телеологии бурного развития техники, о следствиях внедрения ее в самую ткань культуры, о повышении ее манипулятивных возможностей в управлении природным порядком. Возрастающая власть машины, бездушного аппарата осознается как большая цивилизационная проблема, разрешить которую пытаются и “философствующие инженеры”, и оппонировавшие им критики, что осуществляется как в формах философского дискурса, так и в художественных произведениях. К первым опытом философии техники можно отнести работы Э. Каппа, Т. Веблена, П. Энгельмейера, Ф. Дессауэра, Э. Цшиммера, О. Шпенглера, Г. Зиммеля, позднее – Б. Вышеславцева. Появляются также и сочинения писателей, в которых отражается проблематика, связанная с утверждением в культуре техники и инженерного дела. В небольшом рассказе Франца Кафки “В исправительной колонии” находят отражение многие темы, которые входят в традицию философии техники не только среди современных Кафке философствующих инженеров накануне Первой Мировой войны, но и на протяжении всего 20 столетия. К ним относятся технократические тенденции “непрздного класса”, идеалы технократического порядка; этические проблемы, связанные с внедрением машин в тело культуры; возможность гармонического взаимодействия социального и технического миров. В статье анализируются некоторые вопросы, содержащиеся в рассказе Кафки в свете зарождающейся области гуманитарного знания – философии техники.

Ключевые слова: Техника; Инженерная профессия; Кафка; Философствующие инженеры и философы техники

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INTRODUCTION: THE PROFESSION OF THE “UNLEISURE CLASS”

By the beginning of the 20th century, the ideology of the technical class was emerging along with the process of rapid development of technology and engineering. The apologetics of the booming technical civilization also gives rise to criticism of its increasing influence and continuous expansion. Technocratic ideology is formed, in particular, as a claim of the engineering class to manage social processes as complex mechanical aggregates. This utopian idea is critically comprehended in a variety of philosophical and artistic programs that model the limits of the possible domination of technology and technicians.

Already by the end of the 19th century a whole pleiad of engineers appeared who developed their own philosophy of technics, among them Ernst Kapp (1877, p. 489), Friedrich Dessauer (1927), Peter Engelmeyer (1910; 1916), Eberhard Zschimmer (1914), etc. In 1911, at the IV World Philosophical Congress, held in Bologna, Engelmeyer gave a talk on “The Philosophy of Technology” in which from the professional position of an engineer he tries to define the boundaries of the “empire of technology”. In 1914, for the journal “Questions of Theory and Psychology of Creativity”, Engelmeyer (1916) writes an article “Eurology, or General Theory of Creativity,” in which he develops the ideas of a general theory of invention. These ideas correlate well with Thorstein Veblen's criticism of the “idle class” of financiers and bureaucrats [reference], who contrasts the engineering class with the non-producing class of bankers and bureaucrats who subordinate social institutions and determine the development strategy of the entire capitalist system. Veblen's theory argued for the expediency of transferring power and management to specialist engineers. Veblen's (1921) work “Engineers and the Price System” substantiated the expediency of the idea of “power of specialists”. According to Veblen, the corporate interests of industrialists were always focused on the benefit of narrow social groups, while engineers express the interests of society as a whole. Engineers are carriers of neutral disinterested managerial rationality, and on this basis they realize the useful potential of technology for all. Therefore, it is rational to transfer the functions of control from the subjects of ownership to the subjects of “technical expediency”, to the technical staff. The “new ruling class” – managers and top engineers, being freed from property relations – is able to carry out economic and political management in the interests of the whole society in the most effective way. This idea was gaining popularity and was the source of technocratic notions that nourished industrial culture throughout the twentieth century. The engineering profession was becoming popular. Oswald Spengler (1922), in the last chapter of the second volume of *The Decline of Europe*, writes about “another figure” of the new technological order:

it is a figure that is apt to be forgotten in this conflict of politics — the engineer, the priest of the machine, the many who knows it. Not merely the importance, but the very existence of the industry depends upon the existence of the hundred thousand talented, rigorously schooled brains that command the technique and develop it onward and onward. The quiet engineer it is who is the machine's master and destiny. His thought is as possibility what the machine is as actuality.



(p. 505).

However, there is also a growing concern about the unlimited possibilities of the power of technology, and critical writings appear, in which the destructive impact of machine technology on the “residual” world, suppressed and oppressed by machines, is assessed from a variety of positions. Technocratism and its critique manifested as an inextricable unity of a system of opposing value arguments. Technics cannot be value-neutral. Thus the basis of Nikolai Fedorov's philosophy is the criticism of destructive creative energy directed against the human being in his contemporary culture. The protest against dangerous technologies led him to the fantastic project of “resurrection of fathers” as an ideology of revision of undue development of technologies and redirecting them in a favorable direction for humanity. Discussing the Exhibition of 1889, Fedorov (1982) says that technical achievements, more precisely their purpose and the prospect of their destructive impact on nature and humanity are only evidence of “their own immaturity” (p. 443). Fedorov prophetically warns against the expansion of destructive technical inventions that provoke military conflicts, serving the needs of endless wars, the apotheosis of which were the two World Wars of the 20th century.

THE IDEAL OF A SMALL TECHNOCRATIC ORDER: THE PHANTASMAGORIA OF THE IDEAL TORTURE MACHINE

Critics of technocratic domination are also writers. In 1914, against the backdrop of the unfolding World War I, Franz Kafka finished his short story “In the Penal Colony” which would be edited and published in 1919, which Kafka originally planned to include in a collection “*Strafen* [Punishments].” “The Transfiguration” and “The Sentence” had already been created, the idea for “The Castle” had emerged, and by the time this story appeared, the main Kafkaesque themes were taking shape: bodily mutations, existential loneliness, defenselessness against an overpowering world, external violence, anonymous overwhelming power. It is obvious that Kafka as a writer had by this time already established himself both thematically, “ideologically,” and stylistically. The story explores the operation of a perfect torture machine, a technical “Kunststück [artifice]” designed to correct and punish. In a most detailed way, Kafka describes a monstrous tattoo machine for punishing criminals who have broken one of the commandments enacted on the penal island. This machine belongs to the category of inventions that Friedrich Jünger called “the shadow side of technology” (Mikhailovsky, 2013, p. 81), and Boris Vysheslavtsev includes in the system of “murder industry” (Vysheslavtsev, 1982, p. 262). The “torture machine” has a caretaker officer assigned to it, whose functions are reduced to maintaining the machine in proper condition (its elaborate functional purpose is to prolong the time of execution). The entire middle section of the story consists of a careful description from the officer's point of view of the punishment apparatus, this flawless technical invention. The main virtue of this anti-guillotine is to lengthen the punishment procedure according to the body's capacity to tolerate the repetitive manipulation of the tattooed text of the broken commandment. Kafka dispassionately describes in shocking detail the phantasmagoric logic of the



technical device, and in the language of a technical manual he lists its main units: the marker, the harrows, the vibrator, the system of gears, the transmission belts, the felt gag. The machine is technically perfect, it needs no justification by moral laws, it needs no justification at all: “the machine works and speaks for itself.” The officer turns out to be a passionate defender of this torture device and the main ideologist of the order established on the island; he supplies the story about its merits with the most detailed explanations of its functions, the purpose of each individual unit, and he does it in an extremely impassive manner, abstracting from any ethical assessment, filling the text with more and more details produced by this torture mechanism. The Faustian spirit of invention smolders in the officer, and his machine already displays the image of Lewis Mumford's (1970) “megamachine” as the basis and substructure of the order emanating from it.

KAFKA’S CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

In the study “The Paradoxes of Prison” Gennady Khokhryakov (1991) reasonably argues that “different types of punishments come unequally close to the set goals” of reforming the criminal (p. 194). The officer turns out to be the main defender of the order maintained by the machine. He is a “technocrat” who defends with all his might the principle of punishment for misdemeanor. This order is mechanistic and lacks common sense justification, because the accused are mostly unaware of what they have done, they do not know what punishment they will face, they cannot comprehend that their lives will end in the agony of a precisely timed execution, they do not understand the connection between their misdeed and the events that follow it. Because of this, they cannot reform themselves: the logic of the machine does not correspond in any way to the logic of a living being, they are from non-intersecting continuums. In the same sense, the atomic bomb is unnatural – who can it fix?! Its destructive impact is such that there is no need to speak of its “educational,” “corrective” meaning, or rather, its purpose. The triumph of technology in this case means the extermination of its remnant, the “living,” biological, this “wrongly organized rationality.” And the “social utility” of the correctional mechanism in this case shows negative values. The disproportionality of guilt and degree of punishment is obvious, the machine is wrongly arranged, but who in this case will act as an expert? Who makes the decision and on what basis?

So, the order approved on the island has no sense, it contributes neither to the realization nor to the correction of the misdemeanor, and the misdemeanor is negligible. The logic of machine expediency determines the order of existence of the corporeal-living. Everything is Kafkaesque, sealed by a meaningless and inhuman device, approved by the abstract logic of crime and punishment and reproduced with the constancy of the change of day and night. Generally speaking, any human “weakness” falls under the violation of the penal island regime: In this particular case, sleeping on duty is punishable by torture. The main line of argumentation for technocratic domination is constructed by the engineer as the bearer of this system of inhuman principles, for whom the machine appears beyond moral evaluations and moral doubts. Technics as an end in itself and self-value of the modern era, as the domination of the



mechanistic order over the natural order, as a new reality and a new basis for human existence, means the subordination of the human to the technical. The progress of technology accordingly to this system of values will assert itself exponentially, recursively, combinatorially, and unlimitedly. And we are witnesses to this. We, as an aggregate humanity, have accepted the logic of the Kafkaian officer, absent-mindedly listening to those voices that, like Kafka or Fedorov, have realized the impending hopelessness of betting on an absolute machine alibi. And, as delayed victims of the megamachine already included in its inertial course of events, we find ourselves involved in a certain algorithmics. There is no transcendental plan of salvation here, and the transcendental foundations of moral imperatives no longer work. The construction of Kant's categorical imperative, launched in a lightened version of the “golden rule of ethics” in Kafka's plot, acquires a perverted form of categorical sacrifice: the officer, the keeper of the machine, realizing that a decisive and extremely strong argument in its defense is needed, becomes itself its demonstrative victim, its last client. Kafka, in his own way, has dealt with the absurdity of the machine's imposed services. He breaks it down by the right of the author of the story in the reality he invented. But we exist in the technocratic matrix of technological progress abstracted from moral imperatives, with all the horror and power of its final destructive products.

THE COERCIVE LOGIC OF THE MACHINE

The inconsistency between the “logic of the machine” and the “logic of the imperfect living” must be resolved in favor of one of these logics: either the corporeal must submit to the machine and accept its normative algorithms, or the living manifests its will and eliminates the machine. Kafka adopts the second logic: he sees no way out in improving the machine program, he does not try to provide it with additional “moral instructions” to exclude its immoral use, but abolishes it, excludes it from circulation, breaks it as a malicious toy. The situation of choice is modeled by Ernst Jünger (1951/2020):

In fact, growing automatism and fear are closely intertwined with each other, and precisely to the extent that humans, for the sake of technical facilitation of life, give their ability to make decisions at the mercy of external forces. This, of course, brings them various comforts. But with it, of necessity, there is also a further loss of freedom. The loner in society is no longer like a tree in the forest, but rather like a passenger on a fast-moving transport, which may be called the Titanic, or it may be called the Leviathan. As long as the weather is good and the views are pleasant, he hardly notices the state of minimal freedom in which he finds himself. On the contrary, optimism sets in, a sense of power inspired by the speed of travel. Everything changes when fire-breathing islands and icebergs appear. And then technique not only becomes something far from comfortable, but the lack of freedom becomes noticeable, whether in the triumph of the elements, or in the fact that loners who have retained their strength begin to exercise absolute commanding power. (p. 13)



Ernst Kapp (1877) is known to have put forward his theory of technology as organo-projection: “the external world of mechanical work emanating from humanity can only be understood as a real continuation of the organism, as a transposition of the internal world of representations outwards” (Kapp, 1877, p. 115). This theory raised many questions, and Kafka's “torture machine” is embedded in this critical row: what human organ does the torture machine imitate and “complete”? In the light of the invention of various kinds of “power machines [*Kraftmaschinen*],” the theory of organ projection does not stand up to any criticism. Hans Blumenberg explains the nature of τέχνη with a “theological argument”, the essence of the argument is that man is condemned to an existence consisting of suffering, sweat, strength, i.e. everything that can essentially be called “technique” (Blumenberg, 2015). Kafka's plot is an extended example of this justification of the nature of technology: the technical device is a coercive measure of atonement for a broken commandment. Another thing is that according to the “death of God” declared by Friedrich Nietzsche, it becomes a sin to violate the installation of anyone who manages to impose their will instead of God's commandments. Thus, sleeping on a post becomes a mortal sin punishable by capital punishment. The transcendent law becomes the imposed will of the master. Georg Simmel investigated law as “detached logicity” (Simmel, 2010). In order for life to take the form of logical coherence, it is necessary to initially distribute roles within the social organism, isolate it from external “social noises,” define an order and strictly follow it. Kafka does so; he models the closed space of a penal colony and gives its population meaningful functions: an officer (the steward, the keeper of the torture machine), a traveler (a great scientist, as he is characterized in the course of the narrative), two soldiers, one who has not yet committed a crime and is still acting as a guardian of the existing order, and a criminal, a former soldier, whose guilt is obvious, and it does not matter what the degree of this violation is, even if to us it looks monstrously inconsistent with the degree of punishment. The story names indirect participants in what is happening, the commandant and his deceased predecessor. There are other minor characters, but their presence does not change the course of events. Kafka debunks the technocratic idea of a perfect appointed order, for which the human turns out to be a function, a given element of the “population.” The reader also becomes an involved participant in what is happening, or rather, a witness to the event-execution. Moreover, as the plot progresses, one can't help feeling that we gradually turn from unwitting witnesses of torture into accomplices of the execution: agreeing to be involved in the story makes us participants in the events of the story. Kafka succeeds in arousing in the reader (at least in one!) a feeling of deep disgust for what he witnesses. Can technicians (in the broad sense of the word) be the experts who are responsible for making machine decisions, and on what basis? Is there anything we can do to counteract a crime in progress? What exactly is our alibi? Will our abstract moral principles save us from technocratic hell?

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BREAK THE MEGAMACHINE?



Kafka anticipates Mumford's grand metaphor (Mumford, 1970) of the forms of mega-machinery as technical equipment aimed at affirming the matrix of social order. In essence, the officer uses the construct of the categorical imperative, and the maxim of his will becomes the motive to justify the machine's action. Kafka shows how senseless the sacrifice to the machine can be. A bizarre combination of primitive sacrificial impulses, perverted notions of duty, a preference for the technical over the living, - and - voilà! - the picture of absurd existence is complete. Simmel sees the danger posed by technology in the fact that “the technical toolkit can become an independent entity” (Simmel, 2010, p. 15). Alexander Mikhailovsky (2013) develops this idea and shows that this kind of self-assertion of technology not only generates “the fear of a fully autonomous technology that tries not just to subjugate but to eliminate humanity as we know it” (p. 81). That reality is born, which is defined as Kafka's absurd “Kafka's world” that asserts itself “by the measure of essence,” “by the measure of the phenomenon,” “by its realization,” “by the measure of its representation,” “by the measure of reflection.” If we accept the logic of the “megamachine” that ultimately shapes the order of life, then we accept both the moral insufficiency and absurdity of this world, that is, to a certain (albeit very small) extent, the character of existentiality depends both on our agreement to accept it and on our efforts to overcome this Kafkaesque morass. Kafka raises the problem of indifference to the moral problematic in a technicist world, and, like Spengler, derives corollaries from the possibility of imagining the absolute independence of technology from its modes of operation. Spengler, in his famous work *Mensch und Technik* [Man and Technics], called it “the success of practical thinking” abstracted from all side effects of invention and above all from the moral grounds of its exploitation (Spengler, 1931). Mikhailovsky warns against vulgar interpretations of Spengler, in particular, against attempts to contrast *Der Untergang des Abendlands* [The Decline of the West] with the ideas of the later work on *Humanity Technology*: the meaning of the German “*Untergang*,” which is traditionally translated into Russian as “sunset,” carries from Mikhailovsky's point of view the meaning of “completion” or “fulfillment,” it “does not imply the idea of any catastrophe” (Mikhailovsky, 2022, p. 98). In other words, technical civilization expresses its ultimate meanings, goes through the full cycle of its “*Untergang*” and ends as having fulfilled its purpose. It is possible, in another century after Spengler's death, to question the non-catastrophic direction of the development of technical civilization as a whole, but what will this change? More important questions remain that we will be forced to answer. Can machine logic really be ethically neutral? Or must values be incorporated into the machine's algorithmics? After all, value determinism determines the goals and consequences of decision-making. It is the machine in Kafka's story that acts as the regulator of the social order, so who is responsible for what the machine becomes: the inventor, the technical operator, or the independent expert? Kafka alludes to these expert authorities, but as long as the polemic between them lasts, the execution continues.

“THE IMMANENT EVIL OF INDUSTRIALISM”

Boris Vyshevslavtsev (1982) calls the necessity of victims of the technical course



of things “the immanent evil of industrialism” (p. 261). Technocracy strives for power using the matrix of machine order as the highest achievement of order in general. Vyshevslavtsev makes the paralogisms of technocrats extremely clear:

The technocratic tendency is indeed present in all industrialism, but it is present as an immanent evil of industrialism [...] No one is obliged to accept this evil; its overcoming is the task of our time. What is the essence of this evil? It lies, of course, not in industry, but in “industrialism,” not in technology, but in “technocracy”, i.e. in the absolute power of the industrial-technical apparatus over all human life. Those who attack technics and industry do not hit the target and do not guess the essence of evil; it consists in the loss of freedom, in the loss of oneself, one's spirit and soul; it is not technics that is to blame for slavish service to the technocratic apparatus, we ourselves are to blame. (p. 266-267)

It is necessary to connect as cause and effect “the impersonal power of the machine” and the crowd of the modern city, which is full of people who “have lost all soulfulness and spirituality” (Vyshevslavtsev, 1982, p. 268). Industrialization is not directly connected with the liberation of humanity, because the control of things does not abolish the power of technology over people. Industrialization turns out to be a hidden form of total domination, a grandiose enslavement, and Vyshevslavtsev lists many signs of the new “industrial slavery”: a growing techno-bureaucratic apparatus, the “massification” of society, the loss of individual autonomy, an abstract technocratic ideology, ethical and moral transformations, and moral regression. The result of the new round of technical development: “enormous progress was combined with enormous regression, and the result was 'Neanderthal man' armed with the atomic bomb” (p. 283).

WHAT'S THE BALANCE?

Kafka turns out to be one of those artists who realized the consequences of the unlimited growth of technical civilization during the most romantic period of the heyday of engineering in the modern era. He modeled the situation of its absolute domination and presented the arguments of his “disagreement” with the machine logic of domination and subordination. He was quite aware of the prospects of the self-sufficient assertion of engineering. The question is whether and how the destructive power of the machine, which threatens the subtle corporeal substance, can be contained. He shows the dangers of technological determinism, which cannot be perfected by correlations and instructions alone. Kafka was able to show the logic of the development of the technoworld. Our work of studying, understanding, perceiving, rejecting or accepting it cannot be finished. The reconstruction of possible “orders” emanating from the technocrats must not be interrupted before it comes to the “last victim.” We can nurture the hope (or illusion) of a favorable outcome as long as the spirit of technical invention, the “spirit of the machine,” hostile or neutral, determines what will end up in its residue: the human right to life, to moral life, to the source of moral life, rather than the machine's set of instructions by which the human being is marginalized. Can technicians (in the broad sense of the word) be the experts who will be responsible for making decisions, and on



what basis? Everything is decided by the values that motivate those decisions. Technology itself is not capable of providing satisfactory solutions to the question of its application. Technology can be a means of destroying life, of destroying people, or of satisfying empty whims, it can deplete the natural resources belonging to humankind as a whole, and it can provoke discord and war. But it can also be used for the opposite – good – purposes. But only to whom are the decisions entrusted? The question of the moral content of scientific and technological progress is still open.

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