

MARCUSE'S NOTION OF TECHNOLOGY AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY FILIPINO FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates Marcuse's philosophy of technology and its importance for the contemporary Filipino family. It starts with a comprehensive discussion on the philosopher's notion of technology via his critical theory of society mostly found in his works *One-Dimensional Man* and "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology." His other works such as the *Essay on Liberation, Eros and Civilization*, and *Aggressiveness in Advance Industrialized Society* are also consulted for further clarifications. The study analyzes the contemporary Filipino family by discussing some major issues confronting it and presents the negative and positive effects of technology. It also emphasizes the importance of Marcuse's notion of technology for the contemporary Filipino family.

Marcuse conceives technology both as a tool for domination and for emancipation. He claims that technology tends to become totalitarian at the outset of capitalism. This means that it becomes a new form of social control and domination the moment it is organized in the interest of extracting profit. Thus, in the capitalist society, technology shows its totalitarian character. Despite his claim that "technological rationality" has successfully dominated human beings, he views that this rationality also liberates and enriches human life. Thus, for Marcuse, technology is also a tool for emancipation.

The study also shows that the emergence of working wives, urban migration and the growing numbers of Filipino overseas contract workers, increasing number of working children, marital infidelity and marriage dissolution, pre-marital sex, teen-age pregnancies and early marriages, and disappearance of Filipino core values are partly caused by the advancement in technology. Since these issues facilitate confusion, conflict and disorganization in the contemporary Filipino family, technology as a tool for domination is hostile to the integrity of the Filipino family. Nevertheless, the same technology also liberates humanity from material poverty and excessive toil. It is also very important to the Filipino family as it promotes progress and development. Thus, Marcuse's notion of technology is important for the contemporary Filipino family.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Rationale of the Study

Human beings want convenience in living, expediency in labor, and security in life. Sometimes, these “wants” do not even suffice since humans always want more—more convenience in living, more expediency in labor, and more security in life.

This want for “more” has always been the pointed object of the person’s struggle in life ever since. The primitive people who used to live in caves dared to break the walls of timidity, crossed the vast valleys and mountains, and built houses conducive for living. The means for survival is not anymore limited to hunting. Planting was soon practiced, machine was invented, and laws were enacted. All of these came into being because of the person’s want for more. And today, persons enjoy the expediency of transportation and communication, the luxury and convenience of living, and security in life as well.

Technology is indeed conceived as grace for it brings progress in society, gives convenience to persons, and opens new dimensions in life. Thus, technology is indispensable for without it humans might not have conquered the impediments of civilization. However, the exciting story of technology does not stop here. Technology conceived as “grace”, i.e., as “good” is also at the same time a disgrace. It negates itself so that whenever it produces good, it also brings evil effects. As Lewis Mumford says, “Technology, as a mode of production, as the totality of instruments, devices and contrivances which characterize the machine age is thus at the same time a mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social

relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behavior patterns, an instrument for control and domination.”¹ Hence, technology as a mode of production, changes the social relationships among individuals. Specifically, it changes the relationship among members in a given family. Indeed, technology conceived as an instrument for control and domination promotes chaos rather than harmony, confusion rather than understanding.

While technology promotes abundance in life and progress in society, one cannot deny the fact that it also destroys life. Worst of all, technology snatches the person’s uniqueness and leaves the latter helpless amidst the almost unbearably constant and speedy change in society. In the age of technological advancement humans suffer from terminal uniqueness.² But they are not the immediate victims of the devastating effects of technology for they view modernization as a blessing. They, who enjoy the fruits of technology, cannot immediately find in it the veiled face of depersonalization.

Behind all these facts and the rigid change in society, there appears the most vulnerable social group, which the technological processes have a direct and immediate impact — the family. Corporations, industries and human beings are but some factors of change. Corporations and industries shape the economic aspect of the society and human beings (i.e., scientists, technical workers, machine operators, etc.)

¹ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, 1936) quoted in Herbert Marcuse, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology”, *Technology, War and Fascism*, ed. Douglas Kellner, Vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1998), 39

² The world is becoming more and more corporate. For this reason, humans no longer care about their obligation towards their fellow humans. Instead, they exhaust all possible means in order to satisfy their personal interests. This attitude of humans towards technology is termed by Lewis Mumford as an “objective personality”, i.e., when one who has learned to transfer all subjective spontaneity to the machinery which he serves. See Marcuse, *Technology*, 44.

somehow determine the mode of production and the fate of technology. Of all the social groups, the family, that is, the basic unit of the society is the most helpless and vulnerable to technological control.

The once intact and autonomous families have become dependent on what the society offers.³ The speedy development of technology that brought drastic changes in the technical phases of social life has resulted to an unsettled differences of husband, wife and children.⁴

The dawn of modernization brings changes in the once adored and honored family. Technical ways of production cause uncertainty and confusion in the relations among members of the family. Husbands, wives and children begin to have irrational differences that are difficult to settle. In one way or the other, therefore, technology is hostile to the integrity of the family. Michelle Mairesse once said:

Deprived of the communal lands that yielded fuel, game, and pasturage, poor agricultural families, children included, labored in mines and factories up to eighteen hours a day at bare subsistence wages. Hunger and misery were so widespread that the government grudgingly and gradually enacted a series of reforms to avert a revolution.⁵

³ Families in this age of technological advancement are no longer the ones who determine their demands, rather, it is the society (i.e., the "crowd" in Kierkegaard's terminology) who imposes these demands. When the trend of the society is "high-tech" appliances, everybody feels obliged to follow. Hence, the irrational society characterized as the "slave" of technology becomes the irrational standard of one's needs

⁴ Edward Everett Walker, Walter Greenwood Beach and Otis Glen Jamison, *American Democracy and Social Change* (Boston: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), 162

⁵ Michelle Mairesse, "Lewis Mumford's Green City." [article on-line]; available from <http://www.hermes-press.com/machgard.htm>; 08 March 2004

What Mairesse describes is valid only in her own times. Today, family labors not only to answer hunger and misery but also to meet the standard of living set by the society. An eldest son or daughter, for example, is forced to leave school for work hoping to double the income of the family in order to meet the demand of modern society. Some workers even clamor for an increase in salary not primarily because of the unjust computation of wages; rather due to the insufficiency of their income for the "gadget." Evidently enough, families in the age of technological advancement begin to have "false needs."⁶

Now, it is clear that technology is not always a blessing. While it offers progress and convenience, it also provides uncertainty to human existence and irrational differences in family relations. For these reasons the researcher undertakes a study on Marcuse's philosophy of technology and its importance for the contemporary Filipino family.

Herbert Marcuse is among the thinkers who tried to reflect on technology. In his *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse tries to show the evil effects of technology and dehumanizing tendencies. In *Technology, War and Fascism*, Marcuse views technology as a form of social control that dominates the contemporary society.⁷ Although the thinker's philosophy of technology is an analysis of the highly industrialized society, still it is applicable to the analysis of the contemporary Filipino family since the danger of technology is a universal threat. If families in highly industrialized societies are suffering the evil effects of modernization, families in the

⁶ The term "false needs" denotes the irrational transformation of one's wants into one's needs.

⁷ Marcuse, *Technology*, 39