Is There a Political Unconscious in Technology?

¿Hay un inconsciente político en la tecnología?

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Abstract

The question if there is a political unconscious can be understood in two ways. First, it could be the question if our unconscious (in a Freudian or Lacanian way) is political. Secondly, the question could mean: Are there political (social, economic…) structures, institutions, and processes that are unconscious, in the sense that we 'normally' (whatever that exactly means) do not perceive and reflect on them? I want to focus on this second meaning and especially discuss the question if 'technology is society made durable' (Latour, 1991). To put it differently: Is technology a form of the political unconscious?

Key words: political, technology, philosophy.

Resumen

La cuestión de si existe un inconsciente político puede entenderse de dos maneras. Primero, podría ser la cuestión de si nuestro inconsciente (a la manera freudiana o lacaniana) es político. Y segundo, la pregunta podría significar: ¿Existen estructuras, instituciones y procesos políticos (sociales, económicos...) que sean inconscientes, en el sentido de que 'normalmente' (lo que sea que eso signifique exactamente) no los percibimos ni reflexionamos sobre ellos? Quiero centrarme en este segundo significado y discutir especialmente la cuestión de si "la tecnología es una sociedad hecha duradera" (Latour, 1991). Para decirlo de otra manera: ¿es la tecnología una forma del inconsciente político?

Palabras clave: política, tecnología, filosofía.

> *Technology is not neutral. We're inside of what we make, and it's inside of us. We're living in a world of connections, and it matters which ones get made and unmade.*
>
> *Donna Haraway (in: Kunzru, 1997)*

When we ask the question of whether there are institutions, structures, etc. that are unconscious or have at least an unconscious component, we have to accept that this idea is quite old. Already Marx formulated in *Capital, vol. 1* explicitly about the people involved in the process of exchanging commodities: "They do this without being aware of it." (Marx, 1976, p. 166/167). That is to say: the process has at least an unconscious component. Marx' analysis reveals a normally unconscious economic reality. One could even radicalize this argument and underline that every political, social, economical etc. theory has to do so, otherwise it would be superfluous. If everything were consciously known and transparent, why then (social) science at all? This is even true for sociological approaches that try to "follow the actors", e.g., actor-network-theory. One of its proponents, Michel Callon, admits that unwillingly: After having written "that social scientists don't have special access to a truth

that would be inaccessible to actors themselves", some lines later he states: "The role of the anthropology of (the) econom(y)ics is, I believe, to make these anthropological struggles explainable in their theoretical and practical dimensions, by *identifying and revealing the forces* that, in a more or less articulated way, challenge the dominant models and their grip on real markets." (Callon, 2005, p. 12, emphasis added, JS). Here, the social scientist or anthropologist "reveals" (and "identifies") something, meaning that it has been hidden to the actors involved and misunderstood by them (a similarity to the notion of the unconscious). Obviously, scientists also in Callon need access "to a truth that would be inaccessible to actors themselves" (like a psychoanalyst) – otherwise they simply would be no scientists and couldn't "explain" anything.

Unconscious structures, institutions, and processes are anywhere – if only for the reason that total presence and transparency would be unbearable. Reducing complexity means producing an unconscious, like subjects that 'forget' unpleasant events. The memory of the unpkleasant event is no longer there, but it has left a trace in the unconscious that can have effects later on. An unconscious has to have a place, so the task should be to "relocate[e] it in the object" as Jameson (1981, p. 34) put it. And since it is to be suspected that a political unconscious is to be found in artificial objects with higher probability then in, say, stones lying around in a forest, one should focus on technology, since every man-made object can be called technology. Every artificial object has a certain form to fulfill a certain purpose and insofar certain historical decision are sedimented in that form and certain paths were taken (and others not). In that sense we could say that every technological object has political implications. But especially when technology works without disturbance or malfunction (I'll come back to that), we seldomly think about the question if the technology could be otherwise and what this implies. But do we have to call this a "political unconscious"?

There is a wide and multifaceted discussion on the political implications of technology, that is to say, the non-neutrality of a given technology. It's impossible and also unnecessary to review it here in full. I just want to emphasize some points according to the topic of the leading question for the 'political unconscious'. Neutrality of technology means that technology can be used in (politically) different ways – a simple example: A knife can be used to cut vegetables and so help to nourish children, but it can also be used to kill. Its potential to cut does not dictate *what* will be cut. But without a knife cutting as such is impossible (or at least far more difficult) – and of course, this changes things: A world with cutting is different from one without. Another example for this: Photography doesn't determine which photos will be taken, but with photography, the option to make photographs with all its implications and consequences comes into the world.

These very simple examples already show firstly that there is a *tension between the change a technology makes by introducing a new option (otherwise it wouldn't be invented and used) and is therefore political, without thereby determining concrete cases how to use the technology*. Note that this is not exactly the same tension as those between (technical structure) and practical use of technology. My argument is not that technology has a structure (a "script", as Akrich, 1997, puts it) and to pose the question if and to which degree this structure determines actual use and if there are dissident forms of use, etc. Technologies do not determine their exact use, obviously, but nevertheless, they open up a new field of *possible uses* – and this field is political in the sense that it introduces possibilities and also barriers that didn't exist before. That the field of uses is potentially open is shown by the fact that there exist paratexts of technologies, e. g. manuals or tutorials (Akrich/Boullier, 1996), that try to tell potential users how and in which ways technology should be used.

Secondly, it might be that the question if technology is neutral or not homogenizes technology in a problematic way – *there might be technologies that are more or less neutral than others*. As Winner (1980, p. 123) put it in his much-debated paper:

"First are instances in which the invention, design, or arrangement of a specific technical device or system becomes a way of settling an issue in a particular community. Seen in the proper light, examples of this kind are fairly straightforward and easily understood. Second are cases of what can be called inherently political technologies, man-made systems that appear to require, or to be strongly compatible with, particular kinds of political relationships." (p. 123)

For the first case, he gives the example of bridges in New York leading to Jones Beach that exclude because of its low height buses and therefore the poorer – and black – part of the people. It is of no importance here that this particular analysis has been criticized (Joerges, 1999) – the example just reminds us that some technologies might be designed in a way to produce certain political effects. For the second case, he gives the example of nuclear energy – this highly dangerous technology requires at least partially authoritarian structures simply to safeguard the reactors and, for example, to get back plutonium in case it was stolen. The first case, the bridges, could have *different* political implications, it could be 'more neutral'. The second case enforces a certain political structure and is therefore less neutral. To sum up: a) A given technology contains a "whole nest of possibilities that determine future directions for the socius" (Ihde, 1990, 5), without determining concrete uses in the strict sense (Heideggers, 1977 notion of "enframing" might also point to this – a certain field is unveiled without determining concrete practices). This implies the question if all actual uses can be (in principle) predicted from the virtual 'nest of possibilities' or if it is possible, that at least one concrete, unexpected use appears that was unforeseeable and therefore (in a sense) un-implied by the development of the technology. If so, does it make sense to speak of a "nest of possibilities" at all? b) We have to be aware that the tension between the nest of possibilities and concrete uses might be differently structured in different cases of technology.

Now following up on these differentiations we have to ask: How does this relate to the questions of the unconscious? In the cases Winner mentions, the structuring decisions seem quite voluntary and conscious. It is –regardless for now, as I said, if the story is really true– consciously decided to block poorer people. We could perhaps say that this conscious decision is not explicitly communicated and therefore unknown to the later users of the bridges. The conscious, political decision seems to be materialized, naturalized and therefore becomes invisible. This is similar to the notion of ideology as naturalization. An example: Today there are many discussions on computing, machine learning and so on that exactly address this point: There might be racist and sexist biases in these systems, either consciously inscribed or, more likely, because the datasets given are formed by a racist history (Noble, 2018). This fact can also help to illuminate point b) above: While it seems plausible that a complex software and its big data sets can be biased, in case of a much simpler technology like a hammer this is not so easy to see: Can a hammer be racially biased? But even in case of the biases in modern software, can well call these biases 'unconscious'? In the sense that they are normally unknown and are perhaps not intentionally (consciously) inscribed but the result of a forgotten history that might sound convincing (since our personal unconscious is also normally unknown and the result of a history). But is the bias not closer to a notion of *ideology* as naturalization (as Katz, 2020, explicitly puts it)? Some authors use the notion of 'technological unconscious' (Thrift, 2004; Beller, 2021, ch. 1 on the "computational unconscious"), but use that notion in a way that is very close to the notion of ideology. This leads into the very depth of the difficult discussion of the relation between ideology and the unconscious (one starting point would be Althusser, 1971).

In Winners second case, the decision to have a nuclear power plant is quite conscious and perhaps it is known from the beginning that this implies authoritarian political structures. And even if this is not known from the beginning, it might become very clear very soon that one needs authoritarian police structures for example to guarantee the security of the plant. Another famous example: Already in Marx, who intensively discussed technology, we can find the idea that technology has political implications: "It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt." (1976, p. 562). But does this formulation say that i) technology is inherently –and therefore 'unconscious' capitalist, or does this ii) mean that it is neutral and used by capitalists for class war?

iii) But, as a comment to i): Since a technology does not grow on trees, but is man-made, the 'inherently capitalist' character of a technology would mean that it's *made* to have 'capitalist effects' (whatever that exactly means). 'Unconscious' could then mean: It is structured for a certain effect, but this is forgotten in normal use (like in Winners' bridges or the biased computing systems).

iv) But, as a comment to ii): means that even a technology, which is not made to have such effects, could be used to do so, what also implies that a technology, which is made to have such effects can be used not to have them. But if so, if all depends finally on the use, do we need the concept of a political unconscious sedimented in technology at all? Or has the use only a certain space in the virtual nest of possibilities?

This complicated situation can be found be found in many places in the Marxist theoretical tradition. In some parts (e. g. in Marxism-Leninism) the dominant view is that technology is neutral and can be used for better or worse. In some newer Marxist approaches this is decidedly doubted, e. g. Giest (2016) who insists on a rereading of Marx' notion of real subsumption, which describes how technologies are not only used by capital but are formed by capital from the very beginning (he gives also a useful overview on the discussion on technology in Marxism in general). But as he shows in detail this discussion is not very developed and especially the detailed analysis of concrete technologies is missing. Kurz (2004, pp. 112-121) does not address the question 'capitalist technology' in the detailed theoretical way as Giest does, but he discusses from the perspective of revolutionary and emancipatory politics how the 'artefacts from history' should be filtered and selected for use in a post-capitalist society. He thereby uses the interesting notion of "Formvergiftung" (poisoned form, pp. 117, 118, 119) to demonstrate how things developed and produced in capitalism are contaminated by the principles and goals of capitalism – therefore containing a kind of political unconscious (see in a similar way Freundinnen und Freunde der klassenlosen Gesellschaft, 2018: "So it is not just a matter of abolishing the title of ownership, but of (re)gaining social control over technology, which would also mean a profound transformation of the existing machinery, geared to the needs of the people."). There are many more interesting discussions of these problems using Marxist theory (see Panzieri, 1972 and, of course, Castoriadis 1978, pp. 221-248). But these discussions operate without the notion of the unconscious –although as was mentioned above– there seems to a trace of a prä-Freudian unconscious in the work of Marx (one exception from film theory, which moreover draws on Lacan, is Baudry, 1974, p. 75, who again prefers the notion of ideology).

The famous chapter on the fetish character of the commodity argues that the relation between men (and women) is represented as a "fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx, 1976, p. 165). Isn't that somewhat similar to the idea in Winner (regardless if the story is really true) that a racist relation between men is realized in the form of things, that is the bridges? Or is there are a difference, since in Marx' example the real relation

is misrecognized as a relation of things, while in Winners' example the real relation is prolonged in a material arrangement? But this could also be a way of misreading Marx since his argument seems not to be that a real relationship between men (and women) is only misrecognized as a relation between things – but it is really the case that there, where a relationship between men (and women) should be, there is a relationship between things (commodities, money) that is perceived as the natural way things are. This points to the difficulties of relating different positions on the (hidden, 'unconscious') implications of technology.

Anyway, I want to underline that there is a passage in *Capital, Vol. 3* that could be read as pointing to a kind of technological unconscious: "The development of the productive forces of social labour is capital's historic mission and justification. For that very reason, it unwittingly creates the material conditions for a higher form of production." (Marx, 1981, p. 368). In the German original "unwittingly" is "*unbewußt*" (Marx, 1988, p. 269) – unconscious! This passage is about Marx' argument that the "productive forces" –technology– is more and more developed by capitalism and thereby "unwittingly" – unconsciously– creates the "material conditions for a higher form of production". We can sense here another meaning of a political unconscious of technology: Coming back to my discussion above (i-iv.) there might be a further case:

v) A technology that is made to have capitalist effects (regardless for a moment if used to really have them or not) could also exhibit unexpected collateral side effects. In Marx's words: although the productive forces are made to accelerate and expand the capitalist mode of production, they also lead to the destruction of that mode, even if they are by used capitalist to accelerate and expand that mode (I ignore for the moment the question, if Marx' argument is historically and empirically valid or not).

It is obvious that this connects back to point a) made above. It seems that an important meaning for the notion of a political unconscious in or as technology is precisely the case where technology exhibits disruptive and unexpected side effects, *neither intended by design nor by use*. This would be similar in a way to the Freudian unconscious in the sense that the unexpected effect of a technology might be compared to the slips, which show that consciousness is disrupted by the unconscious.

As this somewhat complicated discussion shows: While it has on the on the one hand a certain plausibility that technology is not just a neutral tool, its political implications are on the other hand, not easy to tackle. The idea that a technological "script", as Akrich (1997) calls it, can clearly determine use and effects, doesn't work – that's why Akrich recommends in her analysis, first to analyze the scripts but then secondly to observe actual uses by fieldwork. But if the effects were *only* determined by use, the analysis of the technological form, its scripts or even "Formvergiftung" would be superfluous. Moreover, scripts, as well as forms of use, can have completely unintended effects. And finally, it might be a question of the perspective of the scientific observer, if one sees: 1) effects of scripts, 2) effects of uses or 3) unintended effects.

For each of these perspectives we can describe a different political unconscious in technology:

1. it can be a certain script or even "Formvergiftung" as the virtual nest of possibilities that structures technology but is forgotten or made invisible.

2. a given technology is used - in relation to the 1) script, which is either followed or transformed – to produce certain effects, even when this is not communicated

3. The conflicts between 1) and 2), and the relation to unknown external conditions can result in completely unforeseen effects that disrupt either 1) or 2) or both like a Freudian slip.

This complexity shows on why it is so difficult to precisely predict the political effects of certain technologies. *This complex opacity of technology is its political unconscious in the last instance.* It follows that it won't be an easy task for an emancipatory perspective to decide –as discussed e. g. in Kurz (2004)– how technologies have to be 'filtered' and 'selected' to fit a new societal structure. New social perspectives cannot simply do with the old technologies but inventing new ones or transforming the old ones is a very difficult task. On the question what technology will be like in a "*société post-révolutionnaire*" he first writes: "Ainsi, dans le domaine fondamental du travail, une transformation consciente de la technologie afin que le procès de travail cesse d'être une mutilation de l'homme et devienne terrain d'exercice de la libre créativité des individus et des groupes présuppose la coopération étroite des travailleurs-utilisateurs des instruments et des techniciens, leur intégration dans de nouveaux ensembles dominant la production, par conséquent la suppression de la bureaucratie dirigeante, privée ou publique, et la gestion ouvrière avec tout ce que celle-ci implique par ailleurs." (Castoriadis, 1978, p. 246). But the end there is a certain skeptical tone: "Mais de cette musique d'un avenir lointain nous devons renoncer à rien entendre aujourd'hui, sous peine de la confondre avec les hallucinations auditives que pourrait faire naître notre désir." (p. 248).

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