
CLASSICS

OF DEMOCRACY

Lewis Mumford: Values over Technique

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Simone Weil wrote that the left has consistently espoused two contradictory conceptions of political change: "One consists in transforming society in such a way that the working class may be given roots in it; while the other consists in spreading to the whole of society the disease of uprootedness, which has been inflicted on the working class."¹ The tension between a search for a self-governing community and a radicalism that celebrates uprootedness and mass mobilization underlies the entire history of the modern left and partly explains its failures. Far from seeking to halt the "disease of uprootedness" that has attended capitalist industrialization, leftists have proved among its greatest enthusiasts.

In the 1910s, Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Paul Rosenfeld attempted to resolve the conflict between the two strands of radicalism that Weil described by making the transcendence of the industrial division of labor the goal of their social and cultural criticism. Drawing on John Ruskin and William Morris for their critique of industrialism, these writers for *The Seven Arts* condemned the degradation of work to thoughtless "lowbrow" drudgery and the trivialization of culture as "highbrow" aestheticism as complementary consequences of the factory system. Yet their plans for a reconciliation of work and culture remained confused and contradictory. At times these critics argued, as did John Dewey and other Progressives, that only a scientific politics of centralized planning and the substitution of the new culture of modernism for both bourgeois gentility and folk culture of the masses could realize Ruskin's and Morris's hopes in an urban-industrial age. At other times, and especially in

¹ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), p. 48.

Bourne's wartime essays, these writers called for the repudiation of all ideologies that called for the ascendancy of the centralized state over individual citizens, of the assembly line over self-directed labor, of professional expertise over traditional competence, and of a narrow scientific world view over ethical, religious, and humanistic traditions.

Of all these critics, Bourne most fully realized that their work had to move beyond the modernist satire of bourgeois manners to an analysis of the role of modern technology, total war, and the corporate state in the destruction of all cultural bonds—highbrow and lowbrow—that had previously allowed for personal autonomy and collective resistance to industrial hierarchies. A cult of power has replaced such bonds, according to Bourne, wedding individuals to the “progressive” forces of the industrial dynamo and the militarized state. Bourne's final essays point toward a project of political and cultural renewal, a search for new values that would supplement popular traditions of community and mutual aid, that was cut short by his death in 1918.

Lewis Mumford, a decade younger than the *Seven Arts* writers, remained closer to Bourne's goals than did Brooks, Frank, or Rosenfeld. “It looks to me,” Brooks wrote Mumford in 1934, “as if you are going to do for this generation—which God knows needs it—what Ruskin and Morris left undone for theirs.” But Mumford in fact had taken up the reconstruction of a radical critique of radical industrialism that Brooks and the other surviving *Seven Arts* critics had largely abandoned for literary history, modernist criticism, or mysticism. Mumford's commitment to the early project of *The Seven Arts* is too often forgotten by those who characterize him as primarily a specialist in the history of cities and technology. Mumford centered his analysis of modern technology and urbanism in a concern for the “social core” of values, myths, and practices that had given birth to inventions and cities only to fall victim to its own creations. As he worked through the contradictory legacy of modern radicalism, Mumford discarded the left's long-held enthusiasm for urban-industrial concentration, centralized planning, artistic and political vanguardism, and other banalities of progress. Instead, Mumford chose to cultivate communal values and traditions that opposed the industrial “disease of uprootedness” and presaged a democratic revival of local community. Mumford's life work has particular significance for the American left, as it reconsiders its own positions on industrial technology, modernization, and political organizations.

The optimistic belief in social betterment and historical progress that had been the hallmark of nineteenth-century liberalism and socialism collapsed for Mumford with the coming of the first World War. The war even separated Mumford from his early mentor, the regionalist planner and philosopher Patrick Geddes, prompting Mumford to write Geddes in the 1920s that “there is a real

barrier to understanding between us in the fact that you grew to manhood in a period of hope," while Mumford had only known "war and disappointment, growing up with a generation which, in large part, had no future."

Unlike most of his contemporaries on the left, Mumford attributed the demise of international socialism amidst the outbreak of war to the inadequacies of socialist theory, which, as he wrote in an unpublished essay of 1915, held that capitalist collapse was "inevitable" and therefore "independent of human guidance." Socialists' faith in a progressive future made them "even more fervent than their bourgeois contemporaries in embracing the capitalist regime." However, recent events had demolished "the idea of waiting patiently for the divine far off event which was to usher in the Socialist state," since "the event ushered in was the Great War." A new radicalism, skeptical of "the pretentious catchwords of science," would have to begin with the premise that "the resultant society is dependent upon the deliberate choices of the human beings within it" and not upon assumptions of mechanistic progress toward a socialist utopia.

Mumford's insistence on human agency as the motive force in historical change could (and did) lead him in two different directions: both to a radicalism embedded in ideals and traditions opposed to the new culture of industrialism; and to a radicalism of technical planning, so as to insure that "the future development of society" not be "left to fate." Mumford's critique of evolutionary socialism implied a rejection of elite efforts at the rationalization of society. Yet Mumford believed that the war, by refuting the socialist faith in automatic progress, had cleared the way for active intervention in history through the application of the methods of science to politics.

A similar ambiguity marked Mumford's first book, *The Story of Utopias*, where he reviewed utopian literature from Plato to Wells. Mumford criticized the technocratic implications of utopias like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, which overemphasized "the part that wholesale mechanical organization, directed by a handful of people, would play in such a reconstruction." Though he blamed utopians for spending more time describing new inventions than examining the needs of the "mechanical puppets" fated to populate their paradises, Mumford did not reject utopianism as inherently technocratic and sterile. Instead, his book ended with praise for the use of regional surveys, which, by allowing "every activity and condition" to be "described, measured, and grasped in scientific terms," permitted radical planners to bring their utopias down to earth.

Fortunately, Mumford's reflections on the wartime crisis of the left led him to a more fruitful line of speculation than did his infatuation with scientific planning, though he did not develop the full implications of that speculation until the 1940s. While most intellectuals responded to the onslaught of postwar reaction by choosing to "go with the current" or by embracing the day-to-day activism of leftist party politics, Mumford shared Frank's conviction in *Our America* that the left needed "a period of static suffering, of inner cultivation," so as not to

repeat its "impotent habit of constant issuance into pretty deed."² Looking back on the postwar period in 1930, Mumford wrote that "the situation demanded, not specific attacks on specific evils and specific points of danger, but a wholesale rethinking of the basis of modern life and thought, for the purpose of eventually giving a new orientation to all our institutions."

That "rethinking" first led Mumford to join Brooks in his rediscovery of an American "usable past," but *The Golden Day* indicated that Mumford would quickly transcend the limitations of Brooks's narrow cultural nationalism. Mumford treated the division between American highbrows and lowbrows as the result of the disintegrating tendencies of capitalist expansion and industrialization, which had undone the "medieval synthesis" and cast the pioneer, Puritan, and artisan adrift in the New World. Torn from their families, cities, churches, and guilds, Americans lived on "shadows that linger in the memory," shadows that left them "uneasy and restless." Without the steady accretion of civilizing traditions, the American "settles down, moves on, comes home again, lives on hopeless to-morrows, or sinks back into mournful yesterdays." Was it any wonder, then, that American cultural life had ended in the Gilded Age's "pragmatic acquiescence," in a mere "apotheosis of actualities" that was "all dressed up, with no place to go"?

The Golden Day differed from Bourne's and Brooks's previous indictments of pragmatic culture in Mumford's treatment of antebellum transcendentalism as a wellspring of native critical thought for a new post-capitalist synthesis. If Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance too often resembled a watery appeal to moral uplift, his "virtue of getting beyond the institution, the habit, the ritual, and finding out what it means afresh in one's consciousness" impressed Mumford as a proper methodology for his own social criticism. So too did Whitman's poetic endeavor to "crystallize our most precious experience and in turn to modify, by that act of crystallization, the daily routine."

By the end of the 1920s, Mumford had laid the basis for two parallel but contradictory intellectual programs. Mumford eventually overcame the "progressive" assumptions of his early work in the course of writing his "Renewal of Life" series: *Technics and Civilization*, *The Culture of Cities*, *The Condition of Man*, and *The Conduct of Life*. In the process, he built on his rehabilitation of transcendentalism in *The Golden Day* by exploring early Christianity, Ebenezer Howard's and Geddes's regionalism, and English romantic radicalism as organic values that would create a new synthesis of cultural and practical life. Mumford's search for synthesis took a circuitous route, suggesting organic solutions to the industrial division of culture and production that often proved no better than the problem they were meant to address. Still, Mumford's willingness to formulate alternatives to the values of industrialism made his work far more valuable

2 Waldo Frank, *Our America* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919), pp. 231-32.

than the "post-Marxism" of such Bellamy-epigoni as Alfred Bingham, Stuart Chase, and George Soule, whose devotion to industrial progress and scientific planning only deepened the most regressive currents of nineteenth-century socialist thought.

T*echnics and Civilization* illustrates all the ambiguities inherent in Mumford's early project for organic synthesis. Reversing the technological determinism that guided most discussions of the "Machine Age" in the twenties, Mumford's historical chapters describe how "men had become mechanical before they perfected complicated machines to express their new bent and interest." Long before the invention of the most primitive factory, the ascetic discipline of the monastery, "the regimentation of time" by clocks, and the militarization of men in the armies of Europe's absolute monarchies had instructed Westerners in the values and conduct necessary to industrial labor. Capitalist accumulation, with its emphasis on self-denial, saving, and quantification, intensified this way of life, adding to it the destructive disregard for nature and creative work that had previously been manifest only in mining. As a result, the subjective dimensions of human experience—particularly art and religion, which had been integral elements of medieval craftsmanship—withered amidst the rise of a cult of mechanical processes and mechanical men. "Mechanics became the new religion, and it gave the world a new Messiah: the machine."

Borrowing his periodization from Geddes and his sociology from Veblen, Mumford traces the history of technology through its "eotechnic," "paleotechnic," and "neotechnic" phases. Like Geddes, Mumford admired the small-scale wind and water-powered "eotechnics" that had flourished in Northern Europe and the United States before the advent of "paleotechnic" industry. Mumford predicted that, if only technology were freed from the grasp of an atavistic capitalist class, then a "neotechnic" era of "basic communism" would become a reality, decentralizing industry by means of electricity and the automobile.

Such predictions contradicted the main implications of the book's historical analysis, which showed the fallacy of any interpretation of technical development as either autonomous or neutral. To suggest that the same technology, invented for profit and to further military conquest, would itself spawn a neotechnic order free of those same social forces flew in the face of Mumford's description of the symbiotic growth of a militaristic capitalism and industrial habits and technology. Repeating Veblen's theory of the incompatibility of "leisure class" values and man's efficient "instinct of workmanship," Mumford argued that the "financial acquisitiveness which had originally speeded invention now furthers technical inertia." "The machine is a communist," Mumford declared, thereby repeating the naive technological determinism that fueled so much technocratic prophecy during the Depression and undermined the most promising aspects of his own historical investigation.

Mumford's enthusiasm for the twentieth-century neotechnic synthesis extended to the new systems of work discipline pioneered by Frederick Taylor and Elton Mayo and to the reconciliation of art and technology promised by industrial designers, whose streamlined tools, utensils, and trains illustrate the latter half of the book. Mumford believed that Taylor's scientific management shared his interest in "the worker himself as an element of production," a concern marred only by Taylor's acceptance of the capitalist profit-motive—as if these two elements of Taylorism could be neatly severed in the neotechnic future. Similarly, Mayo's Hawthorne experiments foreshadowed "socialized industry, in which the worker himself is fully respected" and "rational organization, social control, physiological and psychological understanding" are the new standards of society.

If these predictions are startling to those who know only the Mumford of *The Myth of the Machine*, they are not attributable merely to a passing optimism about technology that gave way to a later pessimism. Mumford's neotechnic utopia, with its culture of "mathematical accuracy, physical economy, chemical purity, surgical cleanliness," pervaded all his writings in the thirties, as did his faith in economic planning by skilled engineers, architectural and artistic functionalism, and the extension of technical rationality to the organization of social relations. *The Culture of Cities* ended on a note similar to the neotechnic musings of *Technics and Civilization*, giving a qualified endorsement to International Style architecture as an "organic synthesis" of art and industrial production.

The ambiguities of Mumford's "organicism," and his continued debt to the pragmatic liberalism he had attacked in *The Golden Day*, help to explain his contradictory thesis that a technics shaped by war and capitalist calculation heralded a new, democratic era of decentralized industry and cities. Rejecting the Romantics' wholesale attack on industrialism, Mumford argued that any modern organic community would have to be built "within the innermost purlieu of technics itself." Mumford failed to notice, however, that the emerging organicism of advanced capitalism bridged the gap between culture and practical activity by reinforcing the industrial religion of mechanical life. Elton Mayo's specious "science of human relations" addressed the issue of the industrial separation of work and culture, but it redefined this crucial question as the "human complication of the mechanical and economic," concluding that managers had to extend their authority to the control of "human problems" as well as technical ones.³ While mass culture, advertising, and industrial design had begun to fill the aesthetic vacuum created by the industrial assault on skill and popular culture, aerodynamic toasters were hardly a solution to the regimentation of consciousness that Mumford had traced to the monastic order. Mumford's neotechnic program confused organicism with organization and the basic communism of the future with a more

³ Elton Mayo, *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), p. 176.

sophisticated system of managerial control that absorbed individuals in the new collectivism of advanced capitalism.

Mumford's revision of this early neotechnic utopianism came in response to the threat of European fascism, the indifference of most American liberals and leftists to that threat, and the Allies' adoption of genocidal military tactics to defeat fascism, all of which haunted his work in the 1940s and 1950s. Mumford's polemical and philosophical writings from this period—*Faith for Living*, *The Condition of Man*, *Values for Survival*, *The Conduct of Life*, *In the Name of Sanity*, and *The Transformations of Man*—are undoubtedly his least popular books, probably because they deal so explicitly (and sympathetically) with religious and ethical questions that have become anathema to liberals and academics. Though all these books suffer from what Rosenfeld termed Mumford's "stultifying moralism," they represent Mumford's initial reevaluation of the role of cultural traditions and technics in social organization, which led him from neotechnic prophecy to the profound radicalism of *The Myth of the Machine*.

In "The Corruption of Liberalism" and other writings during the early forties, Mumford developed the broad critique of liberal-progressive culture that would occupy him for the rest of his career, drawing in part on the analysis of the "pragmatic acquiescence" in *The Golden Day* for his attack on liberal isolationism. Mumford bitterly criticized those "pragmatic liberals" who refused to admit that "nations which use the electric motor and the radio" could lapse into mass barbarism under fascism. "Vastly preoccupied with the machinery of life," modern liberalism had made "power over other men, power over nature" the primary goals of civilization. Thus, when faced with Hitler's destruction of democratic government in Germany, liberals remained entranced by the Nazis' "superiority in material organization." The pragmatic liberal's fetish of rational administration, abstract technique, and efficient order had eroded the classical liberal values of individual freedom and self-government, leaving only a "color blindness in moral values" incapable of distinguishing between dictatorship and democracy.

Like Vico, Mumford believed that the "barbarism of civilization" had proved far worse than that of so-called primitive peoples. At least such primitive barbarism "displayed a generous savagery," as Vico put it, "against which one could defend oneself or take flight or be on one's guard; but the former, with a base savagery, under soft words and embraces, plots against the life and fortune of friends and intimates."⁴ Capitalism no longer acted as a reactionary drag on technical development, Mumford realized by the forties. Instead, it spoke the

⁴ Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, eds., and trans., *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), par. 1106.

of mechanical drudgery and pointless leisure. Moreover, the notion of combining man's power over nature in automated technology with the abandonment of any checks on his own inner nature resembled nothing more than the nuclear powers' irrational project of world suicide by rockets and computers. Mumford was too familiar with Melville's fiction to follow the course chosen by Ahab and Pierre in their self-destructive flaunting of limits and restraints.

Mumford not only refuted the subjectivist clichés current within the youth culture, he also demolished the left's long-held hope of destroying the capitalist megamachine by adopting its methods of action. Today, the loudest calls for new ideas on the left end up with predictable proposals for "progressive" PACs, direct mail lists, and slick media campaigns as the tools of political mobilization in the technological age. Such proposals show how few new ideas their advocates really have; by Mumford's criteria, they only "support the very system they attack" by compounding the mechanization of politics and social relations.

By 1970, Mumford had concluded that only a new radicalism of localism and community authority could counter the centralized power of the industrial megamachine. Like Simone Weil, Mumford turned his back on the idea of up-rootedness as a source of radicalization, writing:

The changes that have so far been effective, and that give promise of further success, are those that have been initiated by animated individual minds, small groups, and local communities nibbling at the edges of the power structure by breaking routines and defying regulations. Such an attack seeks, not to capture the citadel of power, but to withdraw from it and quietly paralyze it. Once such initiatives become widespread, as they at last show signs of becoming, it will restore power and confident authority to its proper source: the human personality and the small face-to-face community.

Those truly interested in new ideas on the left will take Mumford's remarks as the starting-point for a democratic reconstruction of our politics.

Mumford's critics over the years have constantly accused him of wanting to turn back the clock to an earlier age—a comment that actually confirms Mumford's claim that the clock is the central innovation of industrial civilization. In a liberal culture in which everything is possible, turning back the hands of a clock remains the final taboo. Yet the progressive time-keepers of the right and left have come up with no comparable theory of the industrial organization of society; perhaps they have been too busy winding their watches. By contrast, Mumford has summoned up the past as a standard by which to demystify the present and its claims to progress, thereby allowing him to imagine a democratic alternative to contemporary life. What Mumford wrote of Morris should be said

of Mumford himself, that he "did more than any other single worker to repair the damage to our whole technical tradition inflicted by those who, in the pride and insolence born of their control of power-driven automata, sought to destroy every rival art, particularly any art that was still supported by ancient traditions and held a warmer human appeal." Mumford's work is our own "Golden Day," a fund of "rival arts" and values worthy of cultivation and renewal.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Fortunately, Mumford's major works are almost all still in print, though *The Golden Day* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926) is an unhappy exception. I have chosen not to note all the citations from Mumford's writings for reasons of space. However, readers interested in the rediscovery of Mumford would do well to begin with *Interpretations and Forecasts, 1922-1972* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), an anthology of selected excerpts from his many books and essays. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich also publishes Mumford's "Renewal of Life" series—*Technics and Civilization* (1934), *The Culture of Cities* (1938), *The Condition of Man* (1944), and *The Conduct of Life* (1951)—as well as *The City in History* (1961) and both volumes of *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (1967) and *The Pentagon of Power* (1970). *From the Ground Up* (1956), *The Highway and the City* (1963), and *The Urban Prospect* (1968) are collections of Mumford's essays on architecture and urbanism, also published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. *Sticks and Stones*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), *The Brown Decades*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), and *Art and Technics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952) are available to those interested in Mumford's work in cultural history. Readers will have to consult their libraries for other works mentioned in this essay: *The Story of Utopias* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), *Faith for Living* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), *Values for Survival* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946), *In the Name of Sanity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954), and *The Transformations of Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956).

A great deal of valuable biographical and autobiographical material on Mumford has appeared in print in the last decade. See Robert E. Spiller, ed., *The Van Wyck Brooks-Lewis Mumford Letters* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970), Michael R. Hughes, ed., *The Letters of Lewis Mumford and Frederic J. Osborn* (New York: Praeger, 1972), Lewis Mumford, *Findings and Keepings* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), *My Work and Days* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), and *Sketches from Life: The Autobiography of Lewis Mumford* (New York: Dial Press, 1982).

The unpublished essay by Mumford from 1915 on the crisis of the socialist left is quoted with permission from the Lewis Mumford Collection, Van Pelt Library (University of Pennsylvania).