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To your machines, citizens!

By Stanislas Deprez

Against the trend towards experts having exclusive control over technological development — justified on the grounds of the public's alleged incompetence — Adeline Barbin argues that citizens should be given greater power so as to ensure that techniques are consistent with democratic values.

Reviewed: Adeline Barbin, *La démocratie des techniques* (Technical Democracy), preface by Andrew Feenberg, Paris, Éditions Hermann, "Technologia ," 2024, 276 p., €28, ISBN 9791037040824.

Adeline Barbin, who several years ago wrote *André Gorz. Travail, économie et liberté* (André Gorz: Work, Economics, and Liberty, Canopé-CRDP, 2013), has written an important new book, *La démocratie des techniques* (Technical Democracy), the first title of "Technologia," a new series by Hermann. The book, which draws on a doctoral dissertation written under Catherine Larrère, is notable for the clarity of its thesis and intelligence of its argument. As Andrew Feenberg explains in his preface, Barbin, a philosopher, claims that a technical democracy – rather than the technocratic ideology of political and scientific elites – is both desirable and possible. She starts with the insight that innovation and invention are guided by cultural and social interests and, in turn, shape them. Because technology affects everyone, it is democracy's business. This claim makes it incumbent upon society to develop mechanisms to encourage discussion and decisions that benefit the common good. Barbin sets out to justify her claim with great rigor.

The contingency of techniques

Barbin begins by reconsidering the classical idea of technique as an autonomous phenomena endowed with its own end. This idea has several variants. The first, based on vitalism, conceives technique on the model of deterministic biological evolution, in which techniques grow increasingly complex while transforming their environment. The second variant, which can be described as anthropocentric, sees technique as the extension of human physical and mental faculties. Arnold Gehlen [1980] popularized a version of this thesis with his theory of "discharge" or "relief" (*Entlastung*): human beings are constantly trying to unburden themselves of difficult physical and intellectual tasks. Other thinkers, while rejecting technological optimism, nonetheless cling to determinism. This is the case of Jacques Ellul [2012], for whom technique is systemic, as inventions and innovation follow one another in an inexorable path, without regard for ethical values. This leads Ellul to conclude that technocracy is necessarily totalitarian and that democracy must reject technique. The problem with this position, Barbin observes, is that it disregards the cultural contexts in which technique develops, reducing it to the sole pursuit of instrumental efficiency. Building on Herbert Marcuse and Philippe Descola, Barbin contends that this way of understanding technique corresponds to a social-historical and cultural project unique to the modern West – and that it is by no means unavoidable. Drawing on actor-network theory [Akrich et al., 2006], she emphasizes the need to understand technical objects as social phenomena that are at least partially contingent.

For a politics of technique

Because technique structures society, it is necessarily political. Technical systems result in objective constraints, and not every technique is compatible with every society. This means that techniques entail values and orientations towards particular forms of action. Put differently, technical norms are always social norms. The doors of the first subway cars could be opened while the train was still moving, allowing the boldest passengers to get off before the train had stopped. Home washing machines are designed to meet the needs of nuclear families. Designed to be sterile, GMO seeds must be bought back every year. "Techniques," Barbin writes, "are co-productive of our relationship with the world; they delineate and organize possible interactions with people and what surrounds us – the human, living, and material

environment" (p. 92). One powerful example is the rise of machinism during the nineteenth century. Because of industrialization, Barbin explains, workers are not just alienated from their employers, they are also alienated from their tools, which dictate their own work rhythm. Moreover, the complexity of machines requires specialists for maintenance and repair. Workers, in this way, become mere operators, with little ability to take initiative on their own. This explains the frequent efforts on the part of workers to reappropriate the production system. If these attempts often fail, Barbin maintains, it was because of the dominance of the ideology of progress in liberal and Marxist thought, which see technological development as necessary to wellbeing and prosperity. Because industrialization was seen as self-evident, the only conceivable political action consisted in attempts to mitigate pollution, risk, and other negative effects of industrialization. Consequently, democracy was reduced to a system for maximizing the number of people with access to consumption – but not production, since consumer and later voter equality is compatible with a technocracy in which power is monopolized by scientific elites on the basis of technical neutrality. To describe this strategy, Barbin borrows Ulrich Beck's [2008] concept of "sub-politics," which refers to implicit politics (though not an absence of politics): the invention and diffusion of technique occur "below" the political realm yet has effects on it.

Expert and non-expert cooperation

After having demonstrated that technique is contingent on the history of society and that it has political effects, Barbin explores contemporary arguments about incorporating technique into democratic frameworks. The best known – the so-called "deficit model" – rests on the idea that the public must be informed by experts who present the facts in the most neutral manner possible. This model, which is premised on the distinction between facts and values and the asymmetry between expert knowledge and lay knowledge, is inherently technocratic. In recent decades, it has given way to the "consultation" or "public debate" model, which seeks input from citizens, local committees, and other discussion groups. While more participatory than the other model, it, too, is based on the distinction between facts and values and its purpose is to make technical innovation acceptable. For example, consistent with the logic of public debate, the European Union requires businesses in the food industry to label GMOs to ensure that citizens can make informed decisions about their consumption choices. However, it does not allow for consideration of whether GMOs

are a wise choice to begin with. Yet as Barbin argues, the purpose of democracy is to promote "the power to decide collectively the type of society that should be built" (p. 168). This conception goes well beyond consumers' right to information and protection.

The case for technical democracy

To conceptualize a genuine technical democracy, Barbin contends, one must clarify what one means by "democracy." One definition holds that it is a decision-making system in which everyone has an equal right to express themselves. Yet Barbin claims that democracy is not limited to this procedural dimension. It is also a cluster of guiding values, such as the right to one's opinion, equality, and the quest for a good life. Technical systems can either favor these values or impede them. They determine social choice, leading to increase dependence, on the contrary, to greater conviviality (a term that Barbin borrows from Ivan Illich [1990] to refer to a technique's capacity to preserve or enhance the autonomy of its users or others). This places us at the center of democratic debate:

> The democratic character of technique is defined from the standpoint of the ability of individuals to actively participate in the determination of individual and collective values that must be incorporated into them or, at least, permitted (p. 208).

For this to occur, citizens must be integrated as early as possible into technical innovation processes. They must also have their say on scientific research, not, of course, to determine scientific results but to decide the goals that should be pursued, the topics to be addressed, and the methods to be allowed. To scientists, such a proposal may seem extreme. But Barbin advances two compelling arguments. First, it is unclear why only the scientific community – in practice, a minority of scientists – should determine research priorities when such matters concern society as a whole. Second, scientific research is already subject to political management – a fact clear to any researcher who has had to apply for financing. The question is thus not whether research should be subject to politics but how to make its management more democratic. Citizens, Barbin argues, should be able to participate in (1) formulating research policies; (2) producing scientific knowledge and technical innovation; and (3) preserving and increasing the political power connected to science and innovation. They should also be able to participate in decisions related to controlling the

connections between industry and government to protect the common good. A genuine technical democracy, Barbin concludes, does not consist in making innovation desirable or quieting criticism with more information. It rests on a collective determination of values, which implies abandoning an "all or nothing" approach to technical progress: "The point of a technical democracy is to organize the role of citizens will play in relation to these questions, because the autonomy and ability of each individual and the collectivity to participate in defining the conditions required for a good life, justice, and a society's history depend on their answers" (p. 238). It is not clear that such decisions will be heard by political actors, the scientific community, or tech companies. But Barbin's argument remains persuasive.

Works Cited

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