© ЕУСПб, 2021. ISSN 2310-3817. Vol. 11, No. 1 c. 246–257

i
eng

Susanna Lindberg, *Techniques en philosophie, Paris: Hermann éditeurs, 2020, 378 p. ISBN: 9791037003690*

Dmitry Lebedev

PhD Candidate
"Stasis" Center of Practical Philosophy,
European University at St Petersburg,
Gagarinskaya st., 7, St Petersburg, Russia
E-mail: dlebedev@eu.spb.ru

From Philosophy of Technics to the Technics of Philosophy

Technology is everywhere. We know this landscape very well as we navigate our daily informational life: from the techno-evangelist magazines like *Wired* to the Silicon Valley billionaire entrepreneurs, from the shady practices of handling personal data to this or that new gadget destined to become obsolete in a couple of years. However, digital disruption is only a minor topic if we grasp how deeply technically accelerated economic production has affected natural systems, to the point where the very idea of nature as being somehow separable from the artificiality that marks human existence seems terribly outdated. If the human condition today is, as Erich Hörl (2015) would put it, a technological condition where immersion in the world of artificial objects and processes unsettles established habits of thinking and making sense, then it is a ripe time for these habits to be challenged and transformed within the realm of thought itself.

Philosophy as thought incarnated and transferred in generations for over 2,500 years always had something to say *about* technics — from Plato and Aristotle to Bacon, Diderot, Rousseau, and beyond, but philosophy of technics is a fairly recent enterprise: one can start from chapter 13 of Karl Marx's *Capital* or the late nineteenth century work of Ernst Kapp. The twentieth century, with its two devastating world wars, industrial mega-machines, atomic bombs, and the rise of consumerism, did not just provide enough ground to raise the question of technology philosophically but also pointed toward the type of answer that Langdon Winner (1978) called "autonomous technology." For thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and his disciples Herbert Marcuse and Hannah Arendt, as well as for Jacques Ellul and to some extent Winner himself, technics has indeed becomes something so extensive, systemic, and automatic that humans can no longer master it as an instrument. What used to be the means now imposes its ends on a pacified crowd and drains the Earth. Pessimistic accounts of these phenomenologically minded continental philosophers were then balanced by more nuanced perspectives on the very technicity of life, both human and non-human: for Gilbert Simondon, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida up to Bernard Stiegler and a host of other contemporary philosophers of technics, some sort of technicity is always constitutive of the (human) subject. We are enmeshed in the world of the productive desiring machines, associated technical milieus, structures of writing and reading, prosthetic memory-devices, and it is not necessary to see this technical condition as some alien external force because it is also both an alienating and liberating internal force. It is in this latter lineage of the thinking of technics that Susanna Lindberg's new extensive and complex work *Techniques en philosophie* (2020) inserts itself.[1]

Lindberg, a professor of continental philosophy at Leiden University, belongs, along with Erich Hörl, Yuk Hui, Pieter Lemmens, and some other authors, to a group of contemporary thinkers who develop ideas on technics from a phenomenological perspective and with a clear debt to the groundbreaking works of Stiegler. From the beginning she urges us "to resist the natural temptation to think that we already know what 'technics' means" (26) — this bracketing

[1] Throughout this text, we translated French *technique* as technics instead of technology. This translation is consistent with the "traditional" ones found in the English versions of the works of Simondon and Stiegler. As we shall see, Lindberg's use of the concept of *technique* is far more extensive than what is normally grasped by the English word technology; it denotes not only a system of objects but also technicity of language and thought. Furthermore, one avoids confusion as to the original word since in French, *technologie* refers to the branch of applied science.

out of the commonsensical approaches to technics that view it as simple means and instruments should open us up to the philosophical thinking of what technics is in itself and what it can become. This kind of *epokhē* is warranted by the technological condition of today: we are surrounded by rapidly developing and changing technologies — from the digital revolution to bio- and nanotech — yet one cannot take it for granted that we know what technics actually is, ontologically and in its functioning. In short, we seem to live in an unprecedented technical epoch without having properly thought it through: as Lindberg says in the introduction, "to think technics, one must firstly 'de-think' that which one thinks technics is" (26). A long journey that follows is this double attempt to de-think the established notions of technics and think through our technical epoch — if we actually still have one.

First, Lindberg quests to dissect and deconstruct a series of inherited philosophical concepts — object, subject, reason, nature, technics itself — in view of their historical development that has been increasingly influenced by the nascent "question concerning technology." Thus, for the Ancients, technics had a somewhat negative nature: it was there "to illustrate and delimit that what knowledge is not" (11). Subordinated to *eidos*, not having an end in itself, simply finishing what nature forgot to accomplish, technics was philosophically secondary, while, one can add, its masters — artisans — were politically more or less irrelevant. In modern times, ushered by the Baconian and Cartesian methodological revolutions, technics is experimental science that "uncovers the universality of nature that technics puts into practice" (12). Modernity "postulates the conformity of technics in general with science" (15). The functioning proper to technical objects remains obscured — it is still a simple instrument manipulated by an artisan or developed according to a certain scientific truth with the prospect of subordinating mute and deterministic nature. If the technical object is subjected to an external intention, then we can hardly say anything concerning it *as such*. Philosophical reflection on technical objects starts when the unquestionable domination of the *cogito* is disrupted. For Lindberg, the works of Heidegger and Simondon represent a key turning point. Through them, but also beyond them, she traces how the notion of object in general "loses something of its substantial compactness and inertia and lets itself to be thought in terms of *dispersion*, *contact* and *function*" (33).

How does this shift of meaning occur? Lindberg describes how, in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, a technical object is inherently ambiguous: a tool is surely used in going about daily business, but it is also

a reference to other tools. As she notes, "the Heideggerian tool is not a thing closed in itself, but a node, in itself invisible, of a complex of references that makes here a tool for habitation but also later on enlarges itself into the whole technical world" (38). This phenomenal technical world is revealed when a tool ceases to function properly, becoming merely present-at-hand. Simondon, in turn, remains a key reference for those who look beyond traditional and inherently subjectivist tropes of "usage" and "instrumentality" that today's technology renders obsolete. Simondon demonstrates that "a relationship between human being and a technical object does not reduce, neither to instrumentality nor to utility but tends toward being-with, that is, toward certain community' (68–69). The ontological purport of this is that there is no quasi-scholastic hierarchy in the order of being with strict borderlines between humans, nature, and technics — a glimpse of what Lindberg will call techno-nature. "With Simondon there is a *physis* as a reservoir of tendencies, qualities and proper virtues" (82) that are technically articulated, brought to being and further adjusted with the help of a human operator of technics, and not a human as the Prometheus unbound. Additionally, apropos Simondon she states that "technical essence does not precede technical objects," and that "invention is a continuous process that renews itself in the course of technical evolution" (79).

Drawing on these intuitions, Lindberg argues in favor of the necessity to move beyond the very notion of a technical object itself. Digital networks of the present day, unlike Simondonian industrial objects, reveal a peculiar essence, that is, "*the essence of modern technics is not so much a thing as a link, a relation, a contact that it operates, and not only between humans, but also between the machines*" (84). Echoing similar calls within media theory to shift an accent from mediums to the processes of mediation, Lindberg carefully moves from an object to a contact describing this logic as the "pulverization of an object" (90). It seems that, at least as Lindberg depicts it, as tangible technical objects multiply beyond count — from smartphones to a myriad of sensors supposed to make our cities "smart" — the phenomenological experience of this new associated milieu is more about sensing its "seamless" functioning rather than making sense of them as singular entities. With this comes the question: Who is the subject of this new technological condition of sensing and making sense?

As one can already guess, according to Lindberg a subject as a user or a producer is not the right option. Rather, one can follow Georges Canguillem, Simondon, Derrida, and Stiegler in exploring how technics is a continuation of life by means other than life. There is a "lack in the heart of technicity, a lack of power to which technical power is

a response" (125). One can go as far as to claim, in the spirit of young Marx, that this technical, productive power is the human essence. However, as Lindberg notes, such a definition "little by little undoes the possibility even to define human essence: on the one hand, *techné* does not stabilize into essence because it does rather than is; on the other, being the property of 'man,' *techné* is no one's property. To the contrary, it constitutes an impersonal and unknown force that alienates humans" (101). We encounter what Lindberg calls the ambiguity of technics: because of a certain negative condition, a would-be technical subject exteriorizes itself in technics that *function*, but in such a way that produces alienated and alienating phenomena, that is, uncontrollable, self-imposing technics, for example, "language, labor, life that have their proper technicity" (122–23). This properly technical exteriority is then interiorized as a whole range of social norms and practices: among philosophical expressions of this interiorized exteriority in the twentieth century were "instrumental reason," "discourses," "apparatuses," "writing," "biopower," among a host of others.

Lindberg asks whether there is "a humane part, a proper authenticity or being that would not be launched by the technical strangeness" (124)? If we posit such an authentic, non-technical core of the subject, then we approach the Heideggerian diagnosis of the totalizing enframing from which only God can save us. In developing these points, Lindberg follows closely Stiegler's work. For the latter, technics was an "organized inorganic matter" that was nothing less than "the materialization of human memory," that is, the opening up of a question of temporality as such (Stiegler 1998). If technics is memory, then human temporal becoming proceeds through encounters with technical objects and processes around us, from a hammer or a spoon to language and the Internet. It makes little sense, then, to search for some extra-technical arche of being or a principle of authentic freedom. Even if we simply decry apparatuses of all sorts that utilize human beings rather than being utilized by them, we still admit that "the proper of human is its technicity that prevents it, however, from being properly human" (122).

On the other hand, if we fully ascribe to the inevitable interplay of exteriority/interiority, if we refuse to search for some authentic and, perhaps, metaphysical core behind this interplay, then we can also see how technical power is also "the power to do, or not to do, or to do otherwise" (127). This technical subject, or a subject of technics, becomes "open to other experiences, namely, to the completely unexpected events that do not conform to any existing technics" (126). According to Lindberg, in its ontological principle, technics is not

some megamachine in the making but is a peculiar relation constantly established and reestablished between humans and its technonatural milieu, between humans themselves as parts of an enlarged technical community and, consequently, of this subject of technics to itself. Through the alienating effects of incessant technical activity, we constitute ourselves as these subjects of technics. As Lindberg states, "there must be in him or her something in relation to which technics is alien and alienating. This something is neither substance apart, nor a natural thing, nor authentic intimacy either: in relation to technicity this something cannot but appear as a withdrawn secret that nevertheless exerts power on technicity" (127).

What is this secret, though? For some, this notion might easily indicate that we bring metaphysics through the backdoor and postulate some "soul" while trying to escape from the grips of such an imagery. The point of guarding this "secret" as openness to new situations, inventions, and prosthetic becoming-other can turn into a philosophical magic bullet with little substance that is simultaneously open to reproach as a metaphysical remnant. Perhaps a way beyond this confusion lies in Lindberg's persistent focus on the power to undo or to do otherwise that seems to require certain techniques of judgment. Ultimately, Lindberg elucidates her concern with keeping this "power source" open in the discussion of trans- and posthumanism. While being opposed in their political orientations, both trans- and posthumanism still share the fundamentally liberal notion of freedom. In this case, this notion implies non-interference in the individual use of "anthrotechniques," that is, of different human enhancements and biotechnological interventions. According to Lindberg, this approach places too much emphasis on the purely technological aspect, which is by default considered emancipatory. In the transhumanism of Silicon Valley, we encounter a quest against some metaphysical core of the subject, his finitude: it postulates natural "essence" and struggles against it. For Lindberg, even though "technicity is the presence of the society in the human" (160) with potentially alienating effects, the task is to navigate a chasm between this technical power and the incommensurable negative-productive "secret."

In a strictly philosophical sense, this notion of the secret brings us to the terrain of what is sometimes called an "ontology of lack," which in political philosophy is represented by such figures as Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau, with their post-Lacanian notions of antagonism, the Real, traumatic kernel, and so on. In our case, Lindberg places this incommensurable, incalculable, improbable ontological instance at the heart of the thought on technics. Whatever technical apparatus exists, and precisely because it exists, "it might be the case

that what is proper to human is to always recreate this secret that escapes the formative mechanisms" (145). That is, this negativity at the core of a subject of technics escapes representation in the technical reality — and lies at the heart of the search and inventions of new technical prostheses. Thus, this negative power transforms into the virtual, inventive, and unknown power (*puissance*) that can both make and refuse to make. Here Lindberg seems to go beyond, or at least mediate between, the opposites of negative ontology with its focus on lack and positive, Spinozist-Deleuzean ontology centered on the virtual potentialities and abundances — without, however, articulating this explicitly enough.

One can note how the logic of this secrecy plays out in Lindberg's critique of to the old fallacy of computer science that claims an identity between human thought and binary logic employed in the machine. Rather, she sees "the relationship of imitation that remains undecidable because it is about being similar or dissimilar rather than identic" (174). This relationship of nonidentity and alterity is at full display in the rapport between *logos* and language: "language always sends *logos* back to itself in order to question itself" (176). This experience of retreat and alterity leads to the following definition of technical reality: it is "the element of beings and thoughts, the one where they evolve but that *does* not properly belong to them and that is not necessarily familiar. Contrary to the milieu, an elementary dimension cannot be circumscribed. One cannot establish a map of its totality — only to find the routes that traverse this or that of its domains, in this or that manner, at this or that moment" (204). For Lindberg, "technics is the interface that makes a contact which is essentially made between the incommensurables (without the latter, mediation would be superfluous)" (205). This interface does not work between hierarchically organized ontological planes. Rather, it connects and transforms cohabitating but hitherto incommensurable phenomena: "digits into words, data into information" (205). At the same time, it leaves behind "what is not transmissible and translatable" (206). Technics is an interface of connection and integration but also of exclusion. Thus, we are also moving past several inherited notions of technicity: that of linear development, which implies that all the gaps in, and resistances to it are necessarily obscurantist and regressive; and that of the totalizing technical system since the human-technical becoming produces new differences, identities, multiplicities, and connections in which "nothing is definitive, nothing is total" (204).

In the fourth chapter, Lindberg examines the interfaces between technics and art, pointing out how an artist today is in many cases less a creator and more an operator or even an observer of techno-

natural processes (at least in bio-art and generative techno-art). In experiments with emergent processes in which the computer and biological codes can work alongside each other, we watch "a contingent, multiple and surprising techno-nature" (231). This looks like a Simondonian liberation, for his goal was "to liberate technics itself so that she could evolve according to its veritable possibilities" (222). What used to be a subject of command-and-control is constantly surprised by new events and realized potentialities — a *thaumazein* for the hi-tech age.

Essentially, contemporary technics invites this estranged gaze of the subject formerly known as a user since they primarily organize and permeate the space without forming a phenomenological world of shared meanings. In the fifth and most innovative and important chapter, Lindberg grasps this essence with the term *déplace*, or displacement: she has in mind here both a process and a state that is always out-of-place, on the move. This displacement consists essentially "in signs and signals" (265). As in an airport, it puts something or someone in motion and changes its location. Lindberg asserts and describes the nonidentity between the intersubjective anthropological world and what, following Latour, might be called the interobjective world of technical displacements (Latour 1996). Elaborating on their relationship, she refers to mimesis. Hence, "the displacements mimic habitable places" (270) but each retains its own specificity: efficient functioning in the first case and symbolic activity in the second. "The principle of technics here is the contact or the transporting, and the technical community distinguishes from the political as an instantaneous, ephemeral and ubiquitous contact distinguishes from the stable institution" (241). In the case of digital subjects that we all are, "even though our identity furnished by the data can be very detailed, it remains nothing but an 'identity-of-displacements' that does not arise from a reflexive relation to oneself" (270).

Is this reflexive relation to oneself still possible? We are all "dividuals" now, simultaneously exteriorized in the writing and recording machines and yet still clinging to the "secret" that the Internet might not know or remember. The gap between technical development and something previously known as "the self" is a source of constant anxiety; we are stuck between increasing surveillance and a vague need to "detox," find "joy in missing out," practice "digital minimalism," in short, to find techniques to battle technology. Lindberg demonstrates through a careful ontological exposition that this conflict is not a destiny. One can deduct from her analysis that it is by mediation of thinking through technics and the originary technicity of human being that new reflexivity is possible. She urges us not to become

blinded by technical affordances but to investigate "the existential situation" that stems from the gap between technical displacements and the secrets that constantly escape this functionality. Thus, at the end of the fifth chapter she argues against both techno-pessimism that sees everywhere an ascent of the new megamachine of governmentality and techno-optimistic accounts of the emancipatory potential of Information and Communication Technology.

Unfortunately, by opening up an explicitly political discussion Lindberg quickly closes it and returns to the ontological interrogation. We still feel that there is a gap between "proper" technical alienation and its "hegemonic" and troubling manifestations that cannot be attributed simply to the failure of thinking properly the essence of technics. Lindberg says that because technics today is essentially displacing, "speaking in terms of an epoch sounds today more and more wrong" (254). If so, are something like political community and common history still conceivable? The proper reflection on technics tacitly leads to the *déplace* of the political questions themselves, despite the fact that the latter arise from the very relationship to technicity that Lindberg elucidates. Of course, one can claim that the sought-for type of critique on contemporary technological displacements is being conducted by other intellectual schools: for instance, does not Maurizio Lazzarato's (2014) notion of asignifying semiotics functioning beyond intersubjective cultural structures in a way that is parallel to that of *déplace*? For Lazzarato, however, this is a testament to our current "machinic enslavement," calling forth new radical political practices. In the end, one feels that Lindberg's fixing of "wrong" philosophical positions on technics might need a more articulated interface for the emergent collective practices and critiques.

Leaving politics aside as the "unsaid" of this book, Lindberg moves to the topic of nature. As it was already visible in Simondon, technics is not an opposite of nature, but something that strives in its concretization to become like nature, thus changing the way we as technical beings perceive and reflect on what the natural is (Simondon 2017). New technical displacements modify anthropological spaces and run up against negatively functioning "secrets" in the human being. With regard to nature, a similar logic is observed: nature "has lost its traditional function of *foundation* in reappearing as an element, as a force of irruption, surprise or event" (290). Nature is not opposed to technics dialectically but marks its finitude and "absolutely overflows it" (297). It functions as a "surprise of the liberation of forms" (301) — Lindberg opposes this surprise to pure negativity but, as we have already said, her conceptual chain of secret/surprise/contingen-

cy/events retains its negative core. In any case, this notion of secret reappears, this time not simply in the subject of technics but at the "heart of being" itself. Frequently referring to the "ecotechnical" ontology of Jean-Luc Nancy, Lindberg also postulates this secret as a "retreat" — of materiality, of the gift of being, of the inner consistency of subjectivity, and, one can suspect, also of politics and critique as we used to think of them before thinking contemporary technics philosophically. This thinking, as if in one radical gesture, reveals the ontological principle of an-archy, the groundless forms and contingencies, the death of God, transcendental subject, and nature.

At the same time, if this ontological an-archy with its constant *déplaces* and retreats is a result of the reflection on technics, one can suspect that ultimately, we are close to bridging the gap between the technical and politico-anthropological communities, of subsuming the latter within the former all the while postulating their radical nonidentity. In other words, the displacing function of technics, of technics that is supposed to mimic political space, now permeates that very space. For instance, one might wonder whether, due to the ubiquity of digital displacing, the institutions of today do not also turn into the force of displacing (say, of "illegal aliens") and into the objects of displacement (as established parties are displaced by their digital challenges, resembling fragile start-ups that feed on social media hype). This is not to say that Lindberg is wrong in identifying the essence of contemporary technics as displacement. Rather, by extending this principle and stretching the very notion of technics to include not just technical objects but also language and thought, she runs the risk of dropping all the criteria of distinguishing between types of situations at the border between technics and politics — and how one can use "the power to do, or not to do, or to do otherwise" (127). Thinking, this time in reflecting on the mode of existence of technical displacements, mimics technics — but simultaneously turns a little bit too much into displacement itself, tacitly restoring, to invoke Arendt, the dignity of *vita contemplativa* at the expense of *vita activa*. Perhaps, what one needs in this type of ontological interrogation is more analytical clarity as to where and when technical displacements are coupled by the socio-political ones (for instance, as in the case of increasing and technically accelerated climate migration). It is also a question of an access to this type of reflection and interrogation, of persistent inequalities concerning the very ability to meaningfully relate to the technical milieu — the very question that animated much of Simondon's thought, but that seems to be toned down in this case. Can one state, somewhat provocatively, that once technics is granted its ontolog-

ical significance, the political resurfaces as yet another "secret" at the very heart of being?

Eventually, with regard to the conceptual figure of displacement, one can say that the whole book is an exercise in this displacement of, and retreat from, traditional ways of thinking technics — and of traditional philosophical notions conceived through the lens of technicity. The reader should keep in mind that the this book is mostly ontologically oriented — hence among the interlocutors one see Heidegger, Nancy, and Stiegler alongside Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillasoux. It is a meticulous and elaborate study of how the displacing essence of contemporary technics displaces our established habits of conceptual thinking and, consequently, of navigating our technonatural spaces. Someone, of course, might remain disappointed that instead of the systemic picture of contemporary technological landscape one is left with a cartography of dispersion, of a flow of interfaces and momentary yet ubiquitous contacts. Additionally, we have seen how highly relevant political questions are both opened and put aside. Be that as it may, since the technological condition of today exposes a certain gap in thinking — technics develops faster than our conceptual reflection, turning into a kind of ecotechnology that is sensed without being made sense of — then philosophy, as Lindberg's case demonstrates, must turn itself into an invention not unlike the kind Simondon dreamt of. By keeping this methodological moment in mind, one immediately notices how Lindberg's book remains vigorously true to Simondon's call to profoundly change the philosophical way of looking at technics, to introduce once again technics into culture — and, in this very move, to open new systematic paths of interrogating politics, ethics, aesthetics, ecology, together with technicity and possibly beyond it.

References

Latour, Bruno (1996). "On Interobjectivity." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 3.14: 228–45.

Lazzarato, Maurizio (2014). *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*. Trans. Joshua David Jordan. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

Simondon, Gilbert (2017). *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. Trans. Cécile Malaspina and John Rogove. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal.

Stiegler, Bernard (1998). *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Winner, Langdon (1978). *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Hörl, Erich (2015). "The Technological Condition." *Parrhesia* 22: 1–15.