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TECHNOLOGICAL CONSPIRACIES: COMTE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SPIRITUAL DESPOTISM

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DESPOTISM

ABSTRACT: *While there have been numerous critiques of the ideology of technology, it is useful to situate technology within both a liberal and a conspiratorial framework. The early work of Auguste Comte offers an ideal vehicle for this kind of analysis. Liberalism's embrace of technology is developed in Comte to produce a theory of scientific and technical elites intent on reinventing society and the individual. This "technological conspiracy" reads very much like elements of a Silicon Valley manifesto describing the cyber-utopia of a near tomorrow. For these reasons Comte is relevant to a discussion of conspiracy today.*

Keywords: *Comte; conspiracies; Internet; technology.*

It is not immediately obvious that there is a good fit between technology and conspiracy. Technology is generally regarded as "neutral" and, in the case of Internet technologies, as an overwhelmingly positive or benevolent force. In fact, technology is often seen as a liberating tool against the conspiratorial and unnecessarily secretive "networks" of autocratic states (Schmidt and Cohen 2014).

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Additionally, there are widespread claims that the application of Internet technologies can help end hunger and poverty, aid the spread of human rights, and further world peace—provided that individuals and societies suitably embrace these innovations. Consider the following from a member of Stanford University’s Persuasive Tech Lab:

Yes, this can be a scary topic: machines designed to influence human beliefs and behaviors. But there’s good news. We believe that much like human persuaders, persuasive technologies can bring about positive changes in many domains, including health, business, safety, and education. We also believe that new advances in technology can help promote world peace in 30 years. With such positive ends in mind, we are creating a body of expertise in the design, theory, and analysis of persuasive technologies, an area called “captology.”¹

Conspiracy, on the other hand, is regarded as a questionable and morally dubious practice and a feature of an earlier age. Machiavelli famously dedicated the longest chapter of *The Discourses on Livy* (1531) to a discussion of conspiracy, and it is in the courtly intrigues of the Italian states of the quattrocento that conspiracy seems most at home. To thinkers in the classical and neo-Roman tradition it was obvious that plots, conspiracies, cabals, and the like, conducted in secret, were the stuff of political life (Skinner 1998). Victoria E. Pagan’s (2012) attempt to study the prevalence of conspiracies in Roman society and Barry Coward and Julian Swann’s (2004) similar study of conspiracy and conspiracy theorizing in early modern Europe appear to confirm this hypothesis.

However, thanks to the efforts of a growing number of scholars in a number of different fields, the status of conspiracy and conspiracy thinking both as a phenomenon of popular culture and a tool of contemporary analysis has been brought in from the margins (see Coady 2006; Heins 2007; Gray 2010; Byford 2011). Scholars now recognize that the reasons why someone believes in conspiracy theories are socioeconomically, culturally, and psychologically complex (Nattrass 2012). As doubts have grown about the legitimacy of authority in an age of growing mistrust and insecurity, so the analyses of conspiracy and conspiracy theorizing have grown more sophisticated. Indeed, one historian of conspiracy and conspiracy theory in the United States notes that conspiracies “at their best, have inserted themselves into the system of checks and balances” (Olmsted 2009, 236).

As to the connection between technology and conspiracy, Jodi Dean (2002, 89) has argued persuasively that the information glut to which we are now exposed (thanks to the Internet and its search engines) provides a perfect home for the construction of conspiracy theories to satisfy our anxieties. Here I offer a different perspective. I take technology to mean not merely the application of scientific principles to the production of tools and gadgets but also techniques, processes and, by extension, a *social doctrine* (Crick 1991; Kaplan 2008), or “technologism.” We may detect elements of this doctrine in pronouncements like those from Fareed Zakaria,² who noted that the Internet “is profoundly disrespectful of tradition, established order and hierarchy, and that is very American.” But we may also think of technology as a particular kind of practice supported by a philosophy that increasingly suggests that all social and political problems are essentially reducible to technical ones (Feenberg 1992; Postman 1993).

A quite distinctive shift has taken place from the grand social or political visions that characterized the early part of the twentieth century. In the face of seemingly overwhelming problems that are global in scope, a deep commitment to technology is now seen as a mark of progress on the social and individual level and, very often, as an alternative to or escape from a political process that is often described as deadlocked or broken. Risk management, rather than sacrifice for the common good, now characterizes secular societies. Policy is increasingly led by the mathematical injunction to calculate possibility and probability before deciding upon the best course of action (Beck 2013). All of these tendencies fit under the rubric of technologism.

Drawing conspiracy theorizing and technology together will help us analyze the shift toward technologism and the subsequent tension that has emerged between impeccable Enlightenment and liberal ideals (such as a commitment to rationality and universality) and the more troublesome features of technological progress (the mass collection and analysis of data and the reduction and elimination of privacy, for example). It also will help us recognize the unavoidably political aspect of technology.

To do so requires us to revisit the notion of “the public.” This notion emerged in the writings of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century liberal philosophers, serving a critical function: it offered both a moral critique of political actors and the necessary expertise needed to govern wisely. The public was regarded as a depository of moral and intellectual enlightenment. However, in the nineteenth century, a technological elite started

to emerge that challenged the authority of this public championed by liberal intellectuals, displacing its moral authority by offering technical solutions to political problems. This development was embraced by thinkers who saw in the international scientific movement of the period a new model of human development that would underwrite the society of tomorrow, a society, moreover, that would move beyond politics. The shift, from liberal public to a new scientific elite, underpins the notion of technological conspiracy.

“Technological conspiracy” refers to a group of individuals possessing a highly developed scientific or technical skill set, who are engaged in activities that advance their interests at cost to the interests of society, while simultaneously producing a discourse that deliberately challenges the conventional wisdom or traditional structures of power within that society.³ One might be tempted to call the members of this conspiracy the *Numerati* (see Baker 2009).

To develop this argument, I will turn to the early political writings of Auguste Comte. For Comte, progress was explained by increasing knowledge and rationalization. His technological determinism asserted that society and its institutions would inevitably adapt to the new scientific capacity underwriting the future. In this way, Comte could identify an “end to history”—or at least an end to the revolutionary oscillations that beset France after 1789.

Comte’s argument is especially interesting because he foregrounds the activities and the role of a new scientific elite in his program for society. At the heart of his theory are sociological and epistemological claims about the proper role of technical expertise and the function of politics; claims, moreover, that are not uncommon concerning the promise of Internet technologies in contemporary debate (see Morozov 2013).

A Conspiracy of the Right Sort

Liberal theorists generally remain hostile to the notion of conspiracy and conspiracy theorizing, and this attitude is reflected in popular accounts. There is a dedicated cottage industry that delights in describing the absurdity of much conspiracy thinking (see Ronson 2002; Kay 2011), and an equally long tradition within academia of dismissing such theorizing as naïve (Popper 1945), paranoid (Hofstadter 1964), hysterical (Showalter 1987), and even dangerous (Sunstein 2014).

The reasons for these attitudes have much to do with the perception (from within the liberal tradition, from the seventeenth century onwards) that government is effective “whenever its institutions are strong, and corrupt when its machinery fails to function adequately” (Skinner 1978, 44). Conspiracy thinking was replaced by a theory of universal rationality and a commitment to constitutional government. Indeed, it would be tempting to say that with the new theories of government that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—particularly those that borrowed machine metaphors to describe either humans or the proper organization of society—the concept of conspiracy largely disappeared from political theory (Gajda 2009).⁴

The political writing of this period is full of machine metaphors—such as checks and balances—intended to describe either human beings or the proper organization of society in scientific, rational, and mechanical terms (see Wootton 2006; Mirowski 2002). On this reading, technocracy and liberalism appear to go together; more so, perhaps, in the United States than in Europe since liberalism, science, rationality, and capitalism developed here together to form the “natural order of things” (see Hartz 1955).

While liberalism may not be not a conspiracy theory per se, it is a theory born out of a political conspiracy. Christopher Hill (1982), for example, recast Locke as part of a Whig Junto, one of the “backroom boys” who avoided the thornier dilemmas of political philosophy by accepting the revolution of 1688 as the “end of all revolutions.” Recent historiography has further shown that Locke and his closest associates were successful co-conspirators throughout the 1680s (Goldie 1992). The Glorious Revolution, far from being bloodless, was a military and financial takeover planned by Whig politicians and their supporters on both sides of the English Channel (Jardine 2008).

Mark Knights has noted that, in the eighteenth century, two factors combined to support a conspiratorial mindset: First, liberal writers feared state power and, second, neo-Roman thinkers were disquieted by a decline in virtue. During this period, states grew larger and less parochial, more enlightened and scientific. Despite this, people tended to attribute unwelcome events to the deliberate actions of human agents, especially if they happened to be one’s opponents. Partisanship added inexorably to a culture of distrust and suspicion, making the charge of conspiracy plausible, “a rhetorical ploy that delegitimized a rival party and legitimized one’s own claims” (Knights 2004, 155).

If party politics was one source of conspiratorial concern, a conspiracy of capitalists working against the public interest was another. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* provides one often-cited example: "People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices" (Smith [1776] 1976, 144). Smith was concerned here not so much with the invisible hand of the market but the sleight of hand of the economically powerful who manipulate laws and regulations for their own ends (Malloy 1987).

Yet liberalism's attitude towards conspiracy is more complicated than a concern with party politics and the corruption of the public interest by the interests of capitalists. In fact, somewhat surprisingly, it is the figure of the liberal political philosopher who emerges as part of a highly secretive "public" engaged in activities unknown to the *demos*.

In his analysis of eighteenth-century Europe, Reinhart Koselleck identified this phenomenon in England, France, and Germany, where a sense of "the public" emerged in a recognizably modern form that served an important ideological function for the emerging bourgeoisie. Public opinion emerged as something endowed with rational objectivity and something to which the state was subject. A public emerged from the joint expression of private conscience and socio-economic interest, from individuals who met in coffee houses, salons, and Masonic lodges to discuss and often to condemn the state's perceived abuse of power. For Koselleck, this Enlightenment critique of the state equated abuse of power with its exercise, a symptom he located in the philosophy of Kant as well as Continental freemasonry and the Illuminati, which remained committed to the ideals of rationalism (Koselleck 1988, 76–85).

The "public" that emerged claimed at once universality through the use of reason and a representative function. Participants promoted the notion of transparency but often met in secret and were almost exclusively male and middle class in composition (see Landes 1988). For Koselleck, the result was a combination of hypocrisy and self-deception made possible by maintaining the illusion of moral innocence (Koselleck 1988, 118–19). Many of the new publics regarded themselves as marginal, operating outside state institutions and hence apolitical. Indeed, "the new elite's absence from the State gave their ideas an acquired political significance. The political secret of the Enlightenment lay in the fact that its concepts, analogous to the indirect assumption of power, were not seen as being political" (*ibid.*, 147). A growing bourgeoisie that desired greater

control over political life formed publics that met in secret, developed codes of behavior and highly ritualized procedures for membership, while also endorsing the idea that only an elite separate from politics could understand the course of history. As Koselleck notes of the Illuminati, its members intended to form an “indirect . . . silent conquest of that State” (ibid., 94).

In the *Second Supplement to Perpetual Peace*, subtitled, the “Secret Article of a Perpetual Peace,” Kant developed a similar though less revolutionary approach. For Kant, the morally upstanding nature of a public composed exclusively of *philosophers* was made possible because only they could speak openly and publicly about governmental policy and behavior while simultaneously providing advice to the government—but secretly and behind closed doors. Philosophers should be consulted because they were incorruptible and incapable of forming seditious factions or clubs.

Although it may seem humiliating for the legislative authority of a state, to which we must naturally attribute the highest degree of wisdom, to seek instruction from subjects (the philosophers) regarding the principles on which it should act in its relations with other states, it is nevertheless extremely advisable that it should do so. The state will therefore invite their help silently, making a secret of it. (Kant [1795] 1991, 115)

The philosopher, for Kant, is the silent and secret conscience of the state, providing a necessary corrective to the inevitably corrupted judgment of lawyers and politicians. The *demos*, it turns out, is governed not by one but *two* elites, one politically self-serving, the other morally upstanding, keen to offer advice as a corrective to authoritarian rule. By endorsing claims of this sort, Kant, the Masonic lodges and the Illuminati were returning to the ancient notion that philosophers ought to govern behind the scenes, possessed as they were of good conscience and sound judgment. If this was a conspiracy, then it was a good one.⁵

Writing in the nineteenth century, Bentham (1843) advocated a similar position with important qualifications. Like Kant, Bentham was conscious of the corrupting actions of politicians and advanced the notion of publicity as an active “system of distrust.” His public composed of liberal intellectuals would act as the moral conscience to the powerful. Intellectuals were the gatekeepers of information who exercised discretion and oversight on behalf of the lower orders, who either had no interest in public affairs or merely aped the opinions of their well-informed betters. This

liberal public was a counter, moreover, to government secrecy, which was excessive and quite inappropriate for democratic governance.

Crucially, the antidote to government secrecy (“secrecy, being an instrument of conspiracy ought never to be the system of a regular government”) would be transparency—but a form of transparency that could be *mechanized*. Bentham recommended a form of panopticism for all institutions, including government institutions. As Semple notes, Bentham was deeply suspicious of secret, government power and proposed that architecture (which he saw as pivotal to good government) provide the remedy. “The architecture of his government offices would have ensured that the functionaries could be supervised, their hours of attendance checked, their appointments monitored, and their actions scrutinized” (Semple 1992, 116).⁶ The persistent belief on the part of liberal thinkers that the philosopher could serve as either public intellectual or, in the case of Kant, co-conspirator in the public interest was enhanced in Bentham by a turn towards correct design.

Ironically, neither Kant, Bentham, nor any other liberal theorist could foresee the sudden displacement of the liberal public by a separate group of individuals who promised to revolutionize society altogether on technical grounds. For a description of this new elite, we must turn to a quite different thinker.

Comte’s Techno-Spiritual Public

Auguste Comte’s nineteenth-century social theory of technological optimism offers a historical analysis that is daring in its appropriation of the notion of the public sphere. As a major “futurologist” (Gane 2006, 9), Comte was hostile to the agent-centered analyses of conspiracy theories and hidden hands. His suspicion of the desire to determine the *cause* of action in favor of measurable behaviors ruled this out. Instead, Comte relied upon scientific thinking and what he saw as the emergence of a new class of individuals that operated outside of government and above the rest of society, an elite of scientists.

Comte attempted to theorize in the grand style, to develop a systematic doctrine that sought to explain how a people without the strong ties that might have traditionally bound them together could, nonetheless, form a stable political community. This was no mere academic question. Comte addressed this issue in the France of the 1820s in an attempt to “close” the

Revolution: to find the solution to the political instability that had plagued the republic since 1789.

Part of his answer required his readers to recognize that politics could not be left to the politicians in their pursuit of ambition or to the demos in their search for guarantees for their rights. Neither group was qualified to rule under the new conditions created by industrial and scientific advance. In his view, Enlightenment philosophy and the Reformation had combined to undermine traditional sources of authority, and the revolutionary period in France, beset with metaphysical speculations and demands, failed to provide a stable alternative.

The need for a new kind of elite was worked out within the context of Comte's evolutionary theory of history and his commitment to a new science of society. This new "system" of understanding was required because the age of spiritual power (theological or papal power) and temporal power (feudal and military) had come to an end, ushering in the dawn of a new scientific and industrial age.

The first stage in Comte's narrative was characterized by theological and military power and an excess of imagination, which resulted in the creation of a supernatural order. Societies in these early conditions existed only to conquer others. The second stage was dominated by metaphysical and legal thinking and was, according to Comte, a transition period, as it offered no possibility of permanent and stable government. This was a period of criticism and argument. Industry expanded without becoming dominant. Military influence began to fade but remained powerful enough to adapt industry for its own ends.

Finally, there was the scientific age. Observation dominated imagination. Industry grew in importance and production became the sole measure of progress in society. This is the era for Comte that is "seeping in" (Comte 1998, 120).⁷ All of human experience, all previous civilizations, he suggested, have been moving uninterruptedly towards the present moment. The future state of humanity would, therefore, be unique and should be understood theoretically on its own terms.

The present state of society is the coexistence of a system in its declining years and an adult system. . . . The new system therefore has only one final step to climb to reach its complete organization and succeed in replacing the old. It only remains to complete its progress in the temporal and spiritual sphere. In the temporal, by taking possession of the lower house; in the spiritual, by establishing morality on principles exclusively

deduced from observation. And everything is ready for that: the means exist, it is only necessary to use them. (Ibid., 46)

Comte makes an additional observation about the rise of this new science. It is a *capacit*y, altering society by permeating it, changing the way people think about organizing their institutions and themselves. This is something that will only increase as more schools are established dedicated to scientific pursuits, with a subsequent decline in the influence of religious doctrine. In fact, suggests Comte, the only reason that the latter remains influential is that morality is attached to theological concepts, something that will continue to be the case until morality itself has undergone a revolution. Once this happens, the power of theological belief will evaporate, and this must be so because of the irresistible force of scientific ideas (Comte 1998, 33).

The period in which Comte writes, he suggests, contains both approaches—scientific and theological—precisely because it is a period of transition. Only if a new system is developed, one that enables scientists to share knowledge across borders, can one move beyond the current period of contradiction. But in any case, Comte suggests that it is inevitable that the new system will be inaugurated, transcending theology and moving beyond the quest for military glory and nationalism (Comte 1998, 34). Comte is very much an author writing at the “end of history.”

The new system of politics will coordinate the activities of the citizenry rather than order them about. In previous eras, people were subjects; in the new system they will be partners via the collective coordination of activity throughout society. Where there was once blind submission, now there is confidence in the opinions of scientists. This is a vision of a new kind of society where hierarchies are flattened, where the only inequality that exists is one of talent and ability, where a new kind of spontaneous order emerges where everyone is the most productive version of themselves, and where “the three greatest causes of disorder: poverty, idleness and ignorance” are eliminated (Comte 1998, 39).

The inevitability of this progression comes about because people switch their allegiance from faith in theological leadership to faith in scientific leadership. “Salient and incontestable facts prove that the people today place the same degree of confidence in the unanimous opinion of scientists that in the Middle Ages they placed in the decisions of spiritual

power” (Comte 1998, 40). A new power elite emerges, then, possessing a spiritual power that is a guarantee of a new kind of freedom. This new elite

demands neither blind belief nor even trust, at least on the part of all those who are capable of understanding logical demonstration; as for the rest, experience has given sufficient proof that their faith in the demonstrations unanimously agreed among positive scientists can never be prejudicial to them, and that this kind of faith is in short not capable of being abused. (Ibid., 9)

The authority of this elite extends society-wide, including education broadly and the regulation of the economy. As Gane (2006) notes, Comte does not develop a theory of exploitation, as Marx did, but rather a theory of the “injustice of social mis-classification,” which should be replaced with the principle, “from each according to his capacity to each according to his contribution” (Comte 1998, 41).

Quite how the scientific elite will implement this principle will probably be a mystery to politicians and the general public alike. Only a few thousand people in all of France really understand astronomy, suggests Comte in a relevant passage, but that does not stop the rest of the population from having faith in the opinions of these wise men, nor should it. In short, Comte thought that a new kind of public, an elite of scientific intellectuals in command of scientific capacity, would govern society while the demos remained, much as in Kant’s theory, passive spectators. In fact the people’s role in Comte’s theory is as *tabula rasa* for a new scientific religion (Gane 2006, 5).

At the level of society, all social and political phenomena ought to be subjected to the same rigorous scientific method of observation as the other sciences. If this means that politics can finally become a positive science, suggests Comte, then by implication it also means that current political institutions need to be updated and, in some cases, replaced altogether. The necessary “social physics” (which relied upon but was separate from physiology or the biological nature of mankind) would make a proper understanding of society possible for the first time by establishing the relations between social phenomena, the influence exerted by one on another, the emergent laws governing their interaction, and, finally, the overall pattern of human development (Comte 1998, 159). Representative democracy would, therefore, no longer be required.

At the level of the individual, this would also require a radical rethinking of what constituted the self, consciousness, and the notion of freedom of conscience, all of which in Comte's view were very much a product of (mistaken) theology. This move in particular made him subject to attacks by such liberal philosophers as Benjamin Constant and J. S. Mill. But this does not make Comte an illiberal thinker. Far from it. For him the separation of powers (spiritual and temporal) was fundamental to good order. Moreover, intellectual authority should remain independent of government, which had a tendency to hinder progress. Like Kant who, in his *Perpetual Peace* and *Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History*, provided a grand theory of the advancement of societies living in an age of Enlightenment, Comte claims that industry will lead to commerce and hence the overshadowing of nationalistic military pursuits. In fact, the military may one day become wholly useless (Comte 1998, 7). However, unlike Kant's philosophers, who would be secret advisers to politicians, Comte's scientists would be part of a highly visible international movement designed to change the world, both politically and spiritually, for the better.

Reading Comte, one is struck by the urgency of the task. Politics needs to be completely rethought, the *arcana* removed from its workings. Political leaders are hopelessly wrong-footed by modern, scientific developments.⁸ Comte wishes to see beneath the surface of things and to identify the laws of society that govern behavior that determine the "grain of the natural progress of civilization" (Comte 1998, 100).⁹ The goal of modern statesmen ought, then, to be to work with these laws rather than against them. For "no one is so insane as to set himself up, knowingly, in revolt against the nature of things" (*ibid.*, 98, 101).

Moral philosophy and all the social and political institutions that have based themselves upon theological and metaphysical speculations need to be reconsidered from the perspective of this new capacity. Instead of the search for causes, which cannot be known, analysis of behavior will produce general principles and laws, "the constant relations of similarity and succession which the facts have with each other" (*ibid.*, 153). And if causes are irrelevant, then so, too, is the search for the inner life, for "such interior observation is necessarily impossible" (*ibid.*, 231).

Comte's individual is displaced from the center of a metaphysical universe and takes his place alongside the animals (*ibid.*, 87). Politics may have escaped the reach of science until now, but the realm of human affairs is not immune to scientific analysis. If we bother to look beneath the surface reality to what lies beneath (*ibid.*, 99) what we find,

interestingly enough, is not agency as one might find in a conspiracy theory, but the absence of it; a design without a designer. We might identify the laws of human behavior and do our best to understand them, perhaps to predict their effects. But we are no more free as a result (*ibid.*). In fact, human freedom as it has come to be understood has little place in Comte's utopia.

Comte's Open Conspiracy

There are striking parallels between Comte, with his questionable grasp of history and his penchant for utopian thinking, and many of the leading figures in Silicon Valley, who want to make the world a better place by letting software “eat the world” (Denning 2014). In Comte's writing, a scientific elite emerges—the people who truly understand how society works—and their authority supersedes that of the old, political class. Crucially, however, this new elite is not composed of hyper-rational technocrats. Nor are they liberal political philosophers. They are *moral* as well as technical rulers but not moral in anything like the sense employed by liberal theorists. Morality is an outmoded approach to understanding the world but serves a functional purpose, operating in parable form precisely because a lack of scientific understanding on the part of the majority (not to mention the leadership) will always persist. What must be developed “is a belief in the power of science as a permanent spiritual basis of the social order” (Comte 1998, 171).

This “spiritual basis” for the new society seems to prefigure one of the major critiques of technology and rationalization offered by Max Weber ([1922] 1946): namely, that it leads to disenchantment, while simultaneously offering a response to it. It also appears to anticipate critiques of technology by thinkers like Heidegger (1977) and Jacques Ellul (1964), who recommend resisting what they regarded as the imposition of technology and the totalization of calculative thinking by evoking a form of spiritual renewal. For what if, *pace* Comte, technology emerged as a spiritual as well as a social doctrine precisely because older, metaphysical and/or theological systems were no longer capable of providing the ties that bind? Technology (and its charismatic leaders) would come to represent a new kind of religion.¹⁰

This, according to Neil Postman (1993), is what makes modern societies like the United States “Technopolies.” In addition, it is also what makes them conspiratorial. If a technocracy is a society at odds

with traditional values yet coexists in an uneasy but often creative tension, a technopoly is a society that renders all values except those of efficiency, technical calculation, and scientific expertise effectively meaningless. In such a culture older ways of thinking, be they religious or philosophical, simply lose their purchase, much as Comte suggested they would. The notion of individual identity starts to disintegrate, the contingency of the metaphysical subject is exposed and found deeply suspect, and institutions that used to act as a filter for information—the family and schools, for example—come under direct assault from the challenge posed to information hierarchies by the radical dispersal of information and knowledge (Dreyfus 2003). While the mantra around such advances is one of empowerment, the opposite may often be the case, combined with a loss of trust in traditional authority *and* in one's own judgment through exposure to thousands of different sources all claiming legitimacy (O'Neill 2002). Information abundance overwhelms the filtering mechanism of traditional institutions, which cannot cope with new demands. Knowledge accumulation replaces understanding and individuals are thrown back upon their own ingenuity. Technologists then step in and offer their products and services all with the intended goal of providing individuals with an upgrade to humanity.

In Postman's view, this is not a deliberate conspiracy per se, conducted by a new technological elite intent on subordinating and controlling the demos; though in their pursuit of market share, Adam Smith's views on corporate conspiracies and the public good seem to have some force here (see Morozov 2015). It is more like a self-inflicted conspiracy by a culture where unbridled optimism, a desire for novelty, and paper-thin attachment to traditions embraces progress at any cost (Postman 1993, 11–12).

This brings us to the second novel accomplishment of Comte's analysis. For his scientific elites do not collaborate behind closed doors but *openly*. In fact, the visibility of this new public—compared to the invisibility of some of its precursors—was crucial to its propagandizing function (Webster 1974).

Writing during a similar period of crisis and upheaval, H. G. Wells wrote *The Open Conspiracy* (1935). Wells advanced the case for a new approach to the perennial problems of human aggression, national conflict, and political inertia. Although the case for peace through economic cooperation between nations had been identified by the likes of Norman Angell (1913) in his *The Great Illusion*, Wells was the only author to make

an explicit case for a global scientific and technological conspiracy. It would be, he notes, a revolutionary movement that reflected the new spirit of the times. “Never before” he claimed in the opening paragraph, “have the conditions of life changed so swiftly and enormously as they have changed for mankind in the last fifty years” (Wells [1935] 2006, 1). Those changes were largely the result of technological and scientific advance. The telegraph had abolished distance and increased communication had turned the world into a neighborhood. This was a “runaway world” in the making (see Giddens 1999).

While science forged ahead, politics and morality lagged behind. Unable to cope with the dramatic changes thrust upon society, politicians reached for a language of personal morality and antagonistic nationalism that was archaic and downright dangerous. There was a fundamental lack of leadership and relevant expertise. Parliamentary democracy and socialism could not fill the ideas vacuum, and so the Open Conspiracy stepped in.

Unlike conspiracies of old, suggested Wells, the Open Conspiracy was visibly led by an intellectual elite of scientific creatives scattered throughout the community. They were “the most sane and energetic people,” anti-militarist in orientation, actively subversive of government and traditional institutions such as schools and universities that perpetuate the folly of tradition. They would be drawn from different disciplines—banking, finance, and the sciences—and would seek to realize the promise of a worldwide organization dedicated to the dissemination of scientific knowledge and enlightenment with an almost religious zeal. In fact, Wells described his conspirators as awakening from an illusion, utterly dedicated to forming a new global community. All this would be made possible by the almost instant exchange of information, a new method of organization that would map the activities of the whole community. Indeed, at the center of the Open Conspiracy there existed “the brain of the modern community, a great encyclopaedic organization, kept constantly up to date and giving approximate estimates and directions for all the material activities of mankind” (Wells [1935] 2006, 53).

Wells’s *Open Conspiracy* was social engineering of a new order and scale, and he was not alone in identifying the need for a radical reshaping of political and social life on technical grounds. In the United States, the Efficiency Movement, with Frederick Taylor as its nominal leader, and later the Technocracy Party, under the influence of Howard Scott, sought to replace politics with expert management based on scientific

principles. What these movements shared was a commitment to reduce waste in government, but also the view that the interest of the scientist was fundamentally universal, as opposed to the vested interest of the politician. As Thorstein Veblen ([1921] 2013, 25) noted in a similar critique:

In more than one respect the industrial system of today is notably different from anything that has gone before. It is eminently a system, self-balancing and comprehensive; and it is a system of interlocking mechanical processes, rather than of skillful manipulation. It is mechanical rather than manual. It is an organization of mechanical powers and material resources, rather than of skilled craftsmen and tools. . . . it is of an impersonal nature, after the fashion of the material sciences, on which it constantly draws. . . . For all these reasons it lends itself to systematic control under the direction of industrial experts, skilled technologists, who may be called “production engineers,” for want of a better term.

What is striking about all of these accounts is the almost complete absence from them of politics and its replacement with a new “social physics,” a trend that continued after the Second World War on both sides of the Iron Curtain and one that continues today (Pentland 2014).¹¹ As Bernard Crick noted, by mid-century, technology was not simply the application of scientific principles to the production of tools and goods, but a doctrine that advanced the idea that all human problems were susceptible to technical solutions if only sufficient resources were made available (Crick 1991, 93). The engineer had replaced the warrior or gentleman as the new archetype, education was fast being reduced to technique and training, and politics was finally becoming a “science” reliant upon laws which could be discovered through observation. In response, Crick reminded his readers that, ironically, politics was the answer to a community that had grown too complex for tradition alone to govern. Of course, it was technology that was being advanced for precisely the same reasons but, Crick pointed out, the latter was only ever convincing when human freedom was ignored (*ibid.*, 17).

For Comte and contemporary technologists, however, this description of the “genuine” nature of politics and human freedom would fall on deaf ears. Society’s problems are increasingly seen as almost exclusively technical problems that require technical solutions, not political ones. “There is never going to be,” suggests Clay Shirky (2011) in *Cognitive Surplus*, “a moment when we as a society ask ourselves, Do we want this? Do we want the changes that the new flood of production and access and

spread of information is going to bring about?” Yet, we might respond, it is precisely these moments that need to remain political lest we succumb to the absurd optimism of technological determinists.

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In his famous rebuttal to Comte, Mill concluded that Comte’s scientific elite, with powers extending into the temporal realm of government and complete control over education, would result in nothing less than a “spiritual despotism” (Mill [1865] 2013, 54).¹² In Mill’s view, Comte’s error was to assign to his class of scientists *collective agency*. Science was not and could never be, suggested Mill, united. While there might be grounds for thinking that scientific opinion could agree upon matters of importance sufficient for practical purposes, to go a step further and assume that unanimity of opinion might be attained and thereby create a body of scientists that could act with a single will was both intellectually suspect and morally dubious.

Scientists would, undoubtedly, hold a preeminent position in society for their contributions to the general welfare and their relative expertise. The mass of men would follow learned opinion implicitly and without misgivings, giving an “intelligent deference” to those who know best (Mill [1865] 2013, 53). But to think that science, which would inevitably find itself in the ascendancy, would require “association” into an organized body was sheer folly. “It is because astronomers agree in their teaching that astronomy is trusted,” he wrote, “and not because there is an Academy of Sciences or a Royal Society issuing decrees or passing resolutions” (ibid., 53). There was, added Mill, an inherent danger in such an approach with respect to government and the separation of powers. For such an agency—charged with educating the public, and commanding authority over public opinion—would, without force, inevitably exert a power comparable to that of the government throughout society but without any of its labor and responsibilities. Fortunately, suggested Mill, such an outcome in the future, despite Comte’s promptings, was unlikely (ibid., 54).

Mill’s criticisms continue to resonate. As the work of historians of science such as Thomas Kuhn (1962) have shown, it is an error to suppose that science is in any way a unified project not beset with all the political positioning and squabbling associated with other human endeavors. Harry Collins notes that this reality is often obscured.

Indeed, the further one is from the very real disagreements that beset the scientific enterprise, the simpler and more unified the project of science appears. “Distance lends enchantment.”

What is nuanced and unclear to those inside the core set becomes, paradoxically, sharp and clear to those outside it. Knowledge roughly follows a “direct square law”—bizarrely, as it travels further, it becomes rapidly stronger because all the uncertainties get lost. So people outside the core are much more certain of what is going on than the people inside who are making it happen! An untidy set of doubts in the centre becomes a competing and polarized set of certainties as the distance increases. (Collins 2014, 85–86)

It is equally wrong to think that science operates independently of politics, for all the protestations of technological entrepreneurs. As Andrew Feenberg (1992) notes, the development of technologies is always a social and political affair. Indeed, from Babbage’s Analytic Engine to the personal computer and the Internet, government contracts have been crucial to the development of information technology (Barbrook and Cameron 1996.) Technology is, therefore, hardly neutral but always already situated within social and cultural practices that shape and are, in turn, shaped by it. Here the efforts of historians of science are especially useful, as they categorize the inter-relationship between particular accounts of history concerning scientific advance and government sponsorship with current policy initiatives. Gary Werskey’s (1978) seminal account of leading members of the scientific establishment in the United Kingdom, and their transformation into political actors as a result of their incorporation into government and private enterprise, along with David Edgerton’s (2011) masterful analysis of the interaction between politicians, universities, and the development of science policy in the twentieth century, go some way to resituating “science” within a political context.

For contemporary technologists and a large portion of the public, the ideological critique of traditional institutions seems empowering. Yet it would be better to see the attacks upon politics as parallel to the publics that, in Koselleck’s telling, tried to remain above the political fray even while engaging in political discourse. What Comte’s scientific elite and many contemporary technologists share with eighteenth-century publics is a disdain for politics made possible by a critique of government and its institutions that simultaneously claims to be apolitical or beyond politics. For Koselleck, this was an inevitable outcome of the

Enlightenment, which was both a social and intellectual movement but one that masked its inherent contradictions in order to permit “a forceful, total attack on a reality in need of reform” (Koselleck 1988, 152).

For Collins, the antidote lies in making technology less mysterious. What is now needed more than ever is to treat science and technology as a special practice but “without telling fairy stories about it” (Collins 2014, 81). But today’s technologists are different from Comte’s technospiritual elite in that they often operate at the head of corporations that provide services and products for a fee, many of which owe their success as much to marketing as to their contributions to the general welfare. The tendency, Collins suggests, to see technology as mysterious, “the preserve of a priest-like caste with special access to knowledge well beyond the grasp of ordinary reasoning,” undermines our ability to understand how technology functions in a democratic society (*ibid.*). Yet it is the mystery, wonder, and promise of these new technologies that provide the incentive for so many to purchase them and the lifestyles that they offer.

Technological conspiracies are the fulfillment of an Enlightenment dream, bringing together political power and technology so that citizens are fully known to their governments (and corporations) such that rules protecting privacy are not merely outdated but are fast becoming irrelevant.¹³ We are hardly passive participants in this drama. We embrace the language and ideas of this technological conspiracy, using them to describe ourselves and our actions, and condemn those who are not sufficiently tech-savvy as irrelevant.

What is needed is a theoretical way to resituate technology within a meaningful social and political discourse. It requires, too, a recognition that not all things in life are reducible to ones and zeros, that politics is not government but is, in fact, an autonomous activity (Crick 1991, 92–110). Politics is always unfinished, unsatisfactory, and incomplete, and this must be so because the alternative is the “quiet and order” of administration, something achieved by the imposition of a visionary order that invariably finds no place for the messiness of political freedom.

An analysis of Comte’s “scientific spiritual elite” brings into sharp relief the centrality of ideas, culture, and technology to human development, the importance of theology long after its fundamental precepts have been questioned and rejected by “science,” and the new relationship that inevitably emerges among government, the governed, and a tiny class of scientific experts who alone “truly understand” how society works.

Technological determinism, the desire to completely remake society, and the inevitability of this new system, today read very much like elements of a Silicon Valley manifesto or press release for a new product or app describing the cyber-utopia of a near tomorrow. For these reasons Comte is relevant to a discussion of conspiracy today.

NOTES

1. <http://captology.stanford.edu/>
2. Cited in Lohr 2000.
3. In terms of definition, the OED defines conspiracies thus: “the act of conspiring; combinations of persons for an evil or unlawful purpose.” However, the OED also notes the figurative meaning, which may refer to a combination of persons for some purpose, which may be morally neutral or even good.
4. Unless within the natural-law tradition you see the possibility of conspiracy thinking. See, for example, Keeley 2007.
5. For the earliest incarnation of this idea see Plato’s *Laws*, 961a–969c. For a recent adaptation, see Strauss 1953, 171.
6. See Bentham, *The Constitutional Code*, Chapter 6, Article 24, “Legislature.”
7. All citations to Comte are from the Jones 1998 edition of his collected works.
8. Henri de Saint-Simon, Comte’s intellectual mentor, famously developed this notion, arguing that there were truly useful people in society—scientists, artists, artisans—and those far less capable “princes and other rulers who are more or less incapable bureaucrats” ([1819] 1952, 74).
9. Google’s Eric Schmidt has said on numerous occasions that policy makers should work with the “grain of the Internet.”
10. As Walter Isaacson’s biography of Steve Jobs makes abundantly clear (Isaacson 2011). One might also think of Google’s famous corporate motto, “Don’t be evil,” which is more than a mere slogan as it is supposed to prohibit conflicts of interest and bias and promote objectivity.
11. One need only think of the disastrous techno-optimism of the 1920s and ’30s by Stalin. For a superb account of the Soviet Union’s embrace of utopia see Kotkin 1995.
12. One can identify the break between Mill and Comte emerging in their correspondence of 1846. See Letters 81–87 in Haac 1995, 350–77.
13. For a recent discussion of the need to reform privacy policies in light of the unprecedented data collection and analysis powers of governments, see Schneier 2015.

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