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Editorial introduction

Mythologies: The Spirit of Technology in its Cultural Context

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Abstract

With its subtle reflection on the essence of modernity, intellectual alarmism, and counter-positioning of the spiritual and the material, Nikolai Berdyaev's essay „Man and Machine“ is a productive point of departure for reflections on the Spirit of Technology in its Cultural Context. A new translation of Berdyaev's 1933 essay and two critical commentaries (Trimble, Mitcham) set the stage for seven research articles which examine the spirit of technology from various perspectives and cultural contexts. The authors work on the problematization of the myth of modern mentality (Böhme), national specificities in the conceptualization of progress and technology (Azarov, Nikiforova, Soentgen), the philosophy of cosmism (Serkova), the politics of technology (Kesarev and Korochkin), and the interaction of technology and religion (Kurtov). The history of electricity in Russia, narratives of resource scarcity in Germany, an intercultural comparison of COVID-tracing apps provide concrete exemplars - complemented by studies of memory in the museum and of the Chinese looking back into the future. A general account is offered in a critique of Yuval Noah Harari's juxtaposition of a natural order and an imagined order, of natural science and a social fabric woven merely from stories. This collection of papers closes with a critical juxtaposition of a belief in the inevitability of major breakdowns and a belief in the efficacy of minor repairs.

Keywords: Philosophy of technology; Modernity; Nikolai Berdyaev; National identity; Yuval Noah Harari; Technological myth; Politics of technology

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Редакторская заметка

Мифологии: Дух технологии в культурном контексте

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Аннотация

Благодаря тонкому размышлению о сущности современности, интеллектуальному алармизмом, противопоставлению духовного и материального эссе Николая Бердяева “Человек и машина” является продуктивной отправной точкой для размышлений о Духе техники в ее культурологическом аспекте. Новый перевод эссе Бердяева 1933 года и два критических комментария (Тримбл, Митчен) подготовили почву для семи исследовательских статей, дух технологии рассматривается с различных точек зрения и в различных культурных контекстах. Авторы работают над проблематизацией мифа современной ментальности (Бёме), национальных особенностей в осмыслении прогресса и техники (Азаров, Никифорова, Сентген), философии космизма (Серкова), политики техники (Кесарев и Корочкин), и взаимодействие техники и религии (Куртов). История электричества в России, нарративы о нехватке ресурсов в Германии, межкультурное сравнение Covid-приложений для отслеживания представляют собой конкретные примеры, дополненные исследованиями памяти в музеях и китайцами, оглядывающимися в будущее. Общий обзор предлагается в критике противопоставления Ювалем Ноем Харари естественного порядка и воображаемого порядка, естественных наук и социальной ткани, сотканной просто из историй. Этот сборник статей завершается критическим сопоставлением веры в неизбежность больших поломок и веры в эффективность малых починок.

Ключевые слова: Философия техники; Современность; Модерн; Бердяев; Национальная идентичность; Харари; Технологический миф; Политика технологий

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This special issue takes as its point of departure Nikolai Berdyaev's essay "Man and Machine", first published in 1933 (Berdyaev, 1933/2023). Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) was a prominent figure within multiple intellectual strands, including Russian religious thought, existential philosophy, and philosophy of technology. He started as a revisionist Marxist philosopher and continued working with the idealist religious visions of spiritual revival and spiritual revolution evident in "Man and Machine." In 1922 he was expelled from the USSR but continued working first in Berlin and then in Paris. He was a famous and successful thinker; his works were translated into multiple languages in his own lifetime.

Berdyaev's philosophy coalesced around ideas of freedom and a conception of ethics that makes freedom possible and valuable, and centered on the concepts of creativity and "spiritual aristocracy." One of the central themes of his later philosophical works was to interpret the specificity of Russian culture through the lens of orthodox religiosity. As Carl Mitcham points out, spirituality and religious thinking became for him a lens through which he looked at technology, its relationship to objectivity, and its meaning in a technological age. Paradoxically, for Berdyaev Christianity worked to demythologize technology.

As Walker Trimble's (2023) accompanying essay to the Berdyaev translation makes clear, technique is not distinguished from technology in Russian. The concept of *technika* in the Russian language was impacted by German engineering and philosophical discourses and so encompassed a wide range of meanings, including machinery, practical skills, and engineering knowledge (Nikiforova, 2015). Just as in English, the concept of technique is incorporated into the word technology (Schatzberg, 2006, p. 487). This conflation is distinct from the Continental languages, which maintain technique to refer to the methods of production and technology to denote its study (p. 489). For Berdyaev, the sense of this division is maintained by distinguishing between technology as broad and narrow — as an industry and an art. It can be both prosaic 'the business of engineers' and spiritual 'the last love of humankind.' Yet his thesis maintains a division between the spiritual or cultural and the technological world, with the former setting the bounds for the latter

Berdyaev's text thus joins a constellation of texts from the early twentieth-century in which was shaped the discourse of modern culture as a process of disenchantment. German intellectuals like Max Weber, Oswald Spengler, and Georg Simmel were united with Russian authors who shared similar attitudes, such as Petr Engelmeyer, Sergey Bulgakov, and Pavel Florensky. Lorraine Daston (2022) has recently characterized this trend as a reflection of the move to characterise the new modern mentality as based on scientific rationality and technology. Daston points to the elusive nature of this phenomenon — and emphasises the influence of these texts on the emergence of an early twentieth-century historiography that traced the emergence of modern science to the scientific revolution. In these works, modern science 'was not the science of Albert Einstein, whose theory of general relativity had just been spectacularly confirmed by the social eclipse expedition in 1919, but rather the science of Galileo and Isaac Newton that had forged modernity' (Daston, 2022, p. 18). We see this trend refracted and qualified in Berdyaev's text. Though when writing in 1933, he maintained he was living 'in the age



of Einstein, not in the age of Darwin’ and emphasized the importance of physics in moving the limits of science outside of sensory perception; he specifically attested to the innocuousness of physics, emphasizing that ‘New discoveries in physics have a positive meaning and are innocent, they testify to the power of human consciousness.’ In contrast the replacement of the Ptolemaic system by the Copernican system was identified by Berdyaev as starting the ‘beginning of modern times’ contributing to the conception of the modern self and triggering technologies ‘terrible power of realisation.’ We see an echo of this thinking in Böhme’s (2023) discussion of Yuval Noah Harari which highlights Harari’s ‘unshakeable’ belief in science, and his characterisation of the life sciences as fundamentally opposed to the self and the soul. For Berdyaev too there was an idealized past, a telluric period of humanity, when its existence was defined by the specific mystical and metaphysical attitude towards the earth. His argument contributed to the shaping of the myths of modern mentalities. In this respect, Berdyaev’s text is also a historiographical statement that shapes a narrative about the history of technology based on its cultural characteristics. The decisive difference to Harari may be that Berdyaev refused the idea of technology arrogating to itself a spiritual power. Harari, in contrast, does not appear to leave room for the human spirit to maintain itself against technology (Böhme, 2023; Mitcham, 2023; Trimble, 2023).

The shaping of myths and the meanings of technology across languages and cultural contexts unify the papers in this special issue which all respond to different aspects of the Berdyaev text, such as his preoccupation with the past. For instance, Azarov’s (2023) article for instance, links the myth of progress in China to the conception (embedded in the language itself) of history as knowable — ‘it is the past that is ahead.’ In this way, the Chinese vision of technological progress was constructed from the perspective of existential strategies of self-cultivation. Similarly, Serkova (2023) considers the philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov in relation to the importance of the past and the technologies of the museum as critical for maintaining scientific knowledge as a ‘cathedral of scientists’.

Berdyaev’s insight that the natural ‘was given a kind of normative character’ in the ‘technological era’ is further reflected in Nikiforova’s (2023) article on Soviet electrification and natural resources, which explains the development of the use of peat on a mass scale to fuel Soviet electrification. Soviet engineers and authorities embarked on a campaign of public education and science communication to transform peat from a cheap and accessible commodity to a valuable scientific and modern resource. Here, we find the spirit of technology in socialism, which ‘could be realised only through electricity’. Yet the conception of peat as an abstract energy source capable of sustaining the technologies of the new utopia contrasted with the embodied nature of citizen’s involvement in energy production. Nikiforova’s explanation of what was happening on the ground collapses the division between man and machine maintained by Berdyaev by emphasising the sensorial nature of identifying and collecting peat. Understanding its botanical composition necessitated the development of practiced tacit knowledge ‘squeezing peat to feel its texture’ and observing how ‘it smears and stains one’s hand.’ Similarly, Soentgen’s (2023) article reveals how cultural myths of scarcity shaped discourses around the necessity of a ‘technological fix’ that could augment the deficit of



natural resources Soentgen particularly highlights the ideological underpinnings of such myths by emphasising that the naturalisation of scarcity has ideological purposes.

In the sequence of exemplary cases, Kesarev and Korochkin (2023) finally examine the implications of national political cultures manifested in mobile COVID-tracing applications. Different value orientations are reflected in the way technologies presuppose the level of control over citizens, as well as the level of engagement and civic consciousness. Their comparison of several apps contributes to the long running discussions within STS studies of the relative power and agency of objects and their users, and the related question of the extent to which the governance of things can be traced.

As a Christian existentialist, Berdyaev distinguished religion and technology, yet termed technology a new quasi religion; a fetish and totem of modern humanity. Kurtov (2023) reconsiders this distinction, showing that if analysed with attention to materiality and cultural practices of usage, interaction with technology can be interpreted as *techno-religious Gestalt*. In Kurtov's view, the religious background of Russian culture, eschatology, and its attitudes towards the future order of things defined both the essence of technology and the forms of interaction with it. Kurtov elegantly weaves together the problematic religious specificity of Russian culture, its reflection in language with interpretation of technology, and cultural practices shaped around it. He implicitly offers a way of categorizing Berdyaev's approach within a deeply antagonistic framework in which Berdyaev's focus on spirituality becomes more of a provocation than an inspiration.

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