



C h e l l i s  
G l e n d i n n i n g

## *Techno-Fascism*

### **Every Move You Make**

Chellis Glendinning

Surveillance of private calls and emails. Cameras documenting every move. No habeas corpus. Unimpeded entry into personal financial records. Voting machines changing election outcomes with the flick of a switch. Protest defined as terrorism. Many people hope that the loss of civil rights Americans have endured since the onslaughts mounted by Bush Administration II is a political reality that can be reversed through electoral will.

Established mechanisms of political power are, of course, the immediately available means for attempting change. Notions of citizens' rights, freedom, and democratic participation are compelling paradigms that have consistently stirred the bravery of U.S. citizens – and yet elder political scientist Sheldon Wolin, who taught the philosophy of democracy for five decades, sees the current predicament of corporate-government hegemony as something more endemic.

“Inverted totalitarianism,” as he calls it in his recent *Democracy Incorporated*, “lies in wielding total power without appearing to, without establishing concentration camps, or enforcing ideological uniformity, or forcibly suppressing dissident elements so long as they remain ineffectual.” To Wolin, such a form of political power makes the United States “the showcase of how democracy can be managed without appearing to be suppressed.”

Wolin rightfully points out that the origins of U.S. governance were “born with a bias against democracy,” and yet the system has quickly lunged beyond its less-than-democratic agrarian roots to become a mass urban

society that, with distinct 1984 flavorings, could be called techno-fascism. The role of technology is the overlooked piece of the puzzle of the contemporary political conundrum.

What are its mechanisms of control?

The use of telecommunications technologies for surveillance is obvious. So are willful alteration of computer data for public reportage, manipulation of television news for opinion-shaping, and use of microwave-emitting weapons for crowd control.

Less obvious are what could be called “inverted mechanization” whereby citizens blindly accept the march of technological development as an expression of a very inexact, some would say erroneous, concept of “progress.” One mechanism propagating such blindness is the U.S. government’s invisible role as regulatory handmaiden to industry, offering little-to-no means for citizen determination of what technologies are disseminated; instead we get whatever GMOs and nuclear plants corporations dish out. A glaring example is the Telecommunications Act of 1996 that, seeking to not repeat the “errors” of the nuclear industry, offers zero public input as to health or environmental impacts of its antennae, towers, and satellites – the result being that the public has not a clue about the very real biological effects of electromagnetic radiation. Inverted mechanization is thrust forward as well by unequal access to resources: corporations lavishly crafting public opinion and mounting limitless legal defenses versus citizen groups who may be dying from exposure to a dangerous technology but whose funds trickle in from bake sales. In his *Autonomous Technology: Technics-Out-Of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought*, political scientist Langdon Winner points out that, to boot, the artifacts themselves have grown to such magnitude and complexity that they define popular conception of necessity. Witness the “need” to get to distant locales in a few hours or enjoy instantaneous communication.

Even less obvious a mechanism of public control is the technological inversion that results from the fact that, as filmmaker Godfrey Reggio puts it, “We don’t use technology, we *live* it.” Like fish in water we cannot consider modern artifacts as separate from ourselves and so cannot admit that they exist.

Social critic Lewis Mumford was among the first to make sense of the systemic nature of technology. In *The Pentagon of Power*, he identified the underlying metaphor of mass civilizations as the megamachine. The assembly line -- of factory, home, education, agriculture, medicine, consumerism, entertainment. The machine -- centralizing decision-

making and control. The mechanical – fragmenting every act until its relationship to the whole is lost; insisting upon the pre-determined role of each region, each community, each individual.

Mumford deftly peels away false hope from a social reality based on principles of centralization, control, and efficiency. In 1962 he peered into the future and saw the pentagon of power incarnate: “a more voluminous productivity, augmented by almost omniscient computers and a wider range of antibiotics and inoculations, with a greater control over our genetic inheritance, with more complex surgical operations and transplants, with an extension of automation to every form of human activity.”

Inverted totalitarianism is both inverted and totalitarian *because* of the power of modern mass technological systems to shape and control social realities, just as they shape and control individual understandings of those realities. Its contemporary existence is most definitely the result of the efforts of a group of right-wing fundamentalists who hurled themselves into power through devious means -- but today’s desperate social inequities, dire ecological predicament, and fascist politic are the offspring of long-evolving technological centralization and control as well.

The challenge is to see the whole and all its parts, not just the shiny new device that purports to make one’s individual life easier or sexier -- which in itself is a contributor to the making of political disengagement. The whole is a megamachine, with you and your liquid TV, Blackberry, and Prius a necessary cog.

Forging a survivable world is indeed going to take a change of administration -- for starters. The terrifying reality that is mass technological society suggests more: radical techno-socio-economic re-organization, and to that end spring visions informed by the indigenous worlds we all hail from, the regionalism of Mumford’s day, and today’s bioregionalism. Or visions of the forced localization that Peak Oil, economic collapse, climate change, and ecological devastation propose.