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**A Radical Alternative to Techno-Capitalism**

In the spring of 2021, the “Fake Window Challenge” went viral on TikTok, capturing the collective imagination with its clever use of projectors to create immersive, picturesque windows on walls by projecting video of, for example, a tropical storm in a rainforest as seen through a window frame.[1] A tweet by user @realaccountyeah offered a grounding interpretation of the challenge, humorously noting “plato clutching his chest and crying and throwing up rn.”[2] I laughed, I agreed, but I was also oddly intrigued; I found myself contemplating the purchase of a projector for my windowless bedroom. This whimsical phenomenon, while entertaining, sparked for me broader reflections on our evolving relationship with technology. As we navigate this increasingly technological era that often feels like the uncertain beginnings of a dystopian science fiction story (before it plunges into a posthuman fever dream), memes and social media posts like the Fake Window Challenge serve as glimpses into how humans are grappling with the transformative effects of technology and alienation—how we are negotiating and navigating life under technocapitalism. These moments of reflection prompt us to question the implications of our increasing dependence on technology and what we might stand to lose without a critical approach. I often wonder if everyone else experiences similar moments that make them pause and question their relationship with technology. The other night, after rechecking my DoorDash app to see where my delivery driver's icon is on the map, I see the icon approach my apartment building. I wait with bated breath, watching intently through the peephole of my apartment door for them to drop off my dinner via “contactless delivery” and leave. I unlock the door and grab my food, but I feel an odd estrangement in this strangely impersonal exchange—the world hasn't changed drastically, there are no hover cars on the streets, and I have yet to be able to upload my consciousness into cyberspace—but no,
this isn’t normal, is it? What’s more is that, as drones and robots are already gradually moving into food delivery, our interaction with other humans decreases still. What is to become of us in the near future?

These kinds of contemplations form the backdrop for Lelio Demichelis’s thought-provoking book, *Marx, Alienation and Techno-Capitalism*, in which he urges us to critically examine the impact of techno-capitalism on our world. He warns us that techno-capitalism’s effects are insidious; despite the dominant narratives that promote ideas of progress and freedom, techno-capitalism has nurtured a new, perhaps less obvious, form of alienation. This system works to conceal its effects, and slowly but surely, we adapt to the ways of life that it offers us without noticing the consequences. Again, the question of what we might stand to lose presents itself: at which point will we turn around and no longer recognize the world around us? Demichelis suggests that perhaps we are “locked up in Plato’s cave where the shadows on the wall are the virtual reality (technological and capitalist) that the system creates for humanity” (p. 2). Narratives that employ terms like “new,” “smart,” and “sharing” are part of what Demichelis calls a “neo-language” that serve to lull us into a false promise of freedom, autonomy, and innovation (p. 3). This is part of what allows techno-capitalism to function as a form of social control. Similar to what Gilles Deleuze argued in “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” our networked society, which presents the illusion of freedom—especially in contrast to the enclosure of the factory—serves to control us in a more subtle and dangerous way.[3] Demichelis argues that the network integrates various forms of work, such as production, consumption, gig economy jobs, and data sharing, into a technological apparatus that commands and controls individual and social behaviors. Online life, he maintains, is characterized by constant suggestions, conformity, and digital echo chambers. Algorithms play a significant role in this environment, leading toward what Demichelis calls an era of “algocracy” (rule by algorithms) that alienates people from autonomy, critical thought, and political imagination.

Demichelis suggests that people are no longer passive users of technology but active participants in a networked society where they identify with and adapt to technological advancements. This is especially relevant in our current moment where all of our movements, both physical and virtual, are tracked, commodified, and fed back to us in the form of personalized ads. This leads to, he maintains, a form of self-entrepreneurship, where individuals become “machine for machines,” constantly connected and hybridized within predefined algorithms (p. 11). This new, voluntary servitude to technology in which individuals willingly delegate themselves to the system leads to a form of alienation where people are separated from their own decisions and creativity, affecting their ability to imagine things otherwise. Demichelis maintains that this system promotes an illusion of freedom and individuality while at the same time subtly pushing for conformity and integration into its apparatus, all the while serving to actively shape people’s behavior and desires. Though this idea is discussed throughout the book, it is especially examined in the first, second, and sixth chapters. In the first and second chapters, for example, Demichelis finds that this is particularly the case on social media, where people’s need for attention and validation alongside their preoccupation with personal image and desire for self-improvement is commodified and used as a means of control in this way (take influencer culture, for example.)

In the third chapter, Demichelis cites Günther Anders’s idea of the Promethean gap, or the disconnect that exists between humans and the world of technology. He argues that this gap widened due to increased technological advancement and has exceeded our ability to keep up with it, resulting in humans not only struggling to fully understand the implications of technological in-
novation but also uncritically giving into its appeal and false promises. For Demichelis, the Promethean archetype represents a society that is absorbed and fascinated by technology, to the extent that it overlooks the potential consequences and loses touch with reality. Using the figures of Prometheus and Narcissus, Demichelis cleverly highlights the possible risks in naive acceptance of, fascination with, and overreliance on technological advancements. Later in the fifth chapter, Demichelis returns to the figure of Prometheus-Narcissus, who represents someone that is isolated, competitive, and bound to technology but believes they are free—falling into techno-capitalism’s trap, or its biopolitical strategy, that seeks to transform people from producers to consumers and, finally, to innovators. Demichelis highlights the crucial elements necessary for this transformation: the dismantling of societal structures, erasure of solidarity, and strong emphasis on the idea of individual freedom. In this chapter, he also explains how the collective imaginary is manipulated through sensory experiences, using the example of music. But the idea extends to how individuals perceive and interact with the world through their senses: the techno-capitalist system influences how people see, hear, and feel the world around them. This influence, he argues, can shape individuals’ perceptions, preferences, and behaviors by strategically appealing to their senses through various means like advertisements, media, and other forms of cultural expression. In other words, the techno-capitalist system aims to place us back into Plato’s cave, presenting images as reality.

Throughout this book, Demichelis makes clear that techno-capitalism is changing the way we understand and engage with our world—arguing that it dominates our lives, shapes our behavior and identities, and ultimately alienates us from ourselves and each other. He identifies a feedback loop in his concluding chapter: the pursuit of pleasure and instant gratification has been intensified by techno-capitalism; the overuse of technology triggers dopamine, diminishes serotonin, and contributes to addiction and isolation; and companies capitalize on this by offering us individualized treatment without addressing the root causes. I am reminded here of telehealth advertisements for drugs that treat depression, anxiety, obesity, or lack of productivity which repeatedly pop up on our social media feeds. So, what is to be done? Demichelis suggests that we must resist the power of techno-capitalism, for it is not totalizing: we need to return to ourselves and to each other; we need to reclaim our autonomy and connection to the earth; we must question the world around us and approach technology critically; we need to “otherwise imagine” because a different world is possible; and most important of all, he concludes, “we need a heretical and dissident thought” (pp. 272, 276).

This book is a challenging read, but that does not take away from its importance and relevance. Perhaps because of the translation from the original Italian, I found parts of it to be jargony and hard to follow. I found it helpful to look up unfamiliar references (particularly figures from Greek mythology) and reread especially dense sections a couple of times. Putting in that bit of extra work reveals an extremely insightful book from which one can draw many parallels to the world around us. Demichelis tells us that another world is possible if we move past the limits that techno-capitalism puts on our imagination.

Notes

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