

Chapter III

The Reversal of Technology

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ABSTRACT

Cities are technological artifacts. Since their massive proliferation during the industrial revolution and their transformation of sites for both physical and virtual connectivity during globalization, cities afford the possibility for propinquity through different interest groups and spaces including the distant-mobile relationships of a society where technology and movement predominates. This chapter will offer an overview of how technology is central to modern development, how technology has been conceptualized, and how virtual development (in terms of both access to the virtual world and the development of the infrastructure to provide this access) is yet another frontier best captured in the notion of technopolis and/or technocity as contextual factors that sustain social technologies. The pervasiveness of technology, the factors that affect the technological experience besides the rhetoric of infallibility and the taken-for-granted delivery of utility and efficiency will also be explored. By looking at the criticisms voiced against urban and virtual development about the loosening of social ties, I argue for a fluid interaction that considers the possibilities for additional and different, if not new social relations, that both physical and virtual interactions afford to urbanites: technosociability. This technosociability should be considered in light of a critical reading of the contextual factors and conditions that support it.

ON TECHNOLOGY AND CITIES

Many concepts have been used to convey the intersection between cities and technology: “technocity” and “technopole” are some of the most distinct. Even though “city” and “technology” should not be used interchangeably, cities can be considered technological machines.

Technology—extensions, forms of life, tools, or affordances—mediates our relationships with our surroundings, and the social relations supported by it. Since most of the human population lives in cities, the juncture between cities and technology as it has developed through industrialization and globalization deserves a closer analysis. The relationship between cities and technology is complex

and one that needs to be unpacked from different angles. Accordingly, definitions and approaches to technology need to be addressed in debates about technology and society. The context in which technologies and cities emerged (industrialization and globalization, modernity and postmodernity, respectively) serves to indicate the historical connection between these two moments in urban development including the notion of the technocity. The way virtual development is received resembles antagonistic views also voiced against urban living. The argument about the loosening of social ties during industrialization and the death of distance during globalization will help explore the kinds of sociabilities technology affords and future trends. Other aspects about technology not usually addressed, such as the rhetoric of technology and the instances in which it fails to deliver what it promises, are important considerations for a fuller understanding of technological discourses in their contemporary context.

The plausible division between technology and the social could be considered to be false since, as I argue throughout this chapter, modern cities, technology, and the social are embedded in a web of relations that is fluid. In a somewhat similar vein, Rothenberg asserts that technology “shape our relations to the world that surround us, modifying it into something that can be used and manipulated to submit to our needs and desires” (1993, p. xii). Since the birth of the industrial city, technology has been the driving force of modern development. More recently, the categories used to provide an understanding of the cultural aspects of globalization are still being debated. From postmodernity to a second modernity, the culture of globalization is for many an intensification of modernity’s foundations and the next major economic and social shift after industrialization (Best & Kellners, 2001). From industrialization to globalization, the underlying principles that guide urban development have been anchored in a strong technological base. This chapter describes the foundations of urban development and technol-

ogy to better understand some of the social issues they generate. Broader issues regarding cities and technology serve to better frame our expectations of and disappointments with technology as well as to better articulate concerns. Technology has been addressed positively, to account for what it promises, but rarely has it been addressed to account for what it fails to provide. Critical approaches to technology emerged during the civil rights and other social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. Different from the zero-sum game and cornucopia paradigms on technological growth, Best and Kellners (2001) argue instead for a “discourse of limits” in which technology is paired with social evolution and where scientific development, human beings, natural surroundings, and life context can coexist harmoniously.

Debates about technology, however, usually fall within the restrictive rhetoric of the modern impulse for progress and development. Many consider science and technology interchangeable, one incomplete without the other, and have coined the term technoscience to refer to this intersection. Modernity, concerned as it has been, with systems of order and control over the human world through technology came to be considered a problem solver. There lies the implicit construction of a concern, problem, or issue to be tackled. An ideological reading of control and efficiency presupposes a chaotic and out-of-control world. Framed by notions of hierarchy, standardization, centralization, expertise bureaucracy, and management, modernity offered a dominant ideology regarding how a modern and developed society should function. Rationality, order, and control as the bases of the modern ideology function to monitor, count, assess, and manage (Scott, 1998, pp. 81-82, in Bergerson, 2006, pp. 45). Likewise, logic, order, rule, and objective reasoning are part of the ideological foundations of the modern project (Coyne & Wiszniewski, 2000). Specialization, formalization (the use of rules, regulations, and standard operating procedures), and hierarchical authority

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