

Chapter 29

Human Enhancement Technologies and Democratic Citizenship

Jean-Paul Gagnon

Australian Catholic University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter articulates that scholars write about Human Enhancement Technologies (HET) in two ways. This is not a reflection of a reality in the literature but rather a heuristic designed to contextualize democratic citizenship within contemporary HET discussions. The first way is to write about HET as possible realities far off into the future. The second way is to write about HET that can be realised seemingly as soon as tomorrow. For democratic citizenship, writing in the first case is either utopian or dystopian. It is either the projection of democracy's total triumph or its utter collapse caused by the type of rots that lead to democide. But writing in the second case is stimulating and vibrant. There are, for example, numerous calls for HET-led reforms in the literature. These reforms are needed to help answer the crisis of the citizen's august discontent (the growing and increasingly legitimized political apathy and political abstention observed in, and performed by, the citizenry). The purpose of this chapter is to focus on this second case—this more developed body of literature—and to theorise the interface between democratic citizenship and HET.

INTRODUCTION

As an area of study, citizenship boasts a large and varied body of literature. Key foci include the more traditional concern about an individual's relationship with the state, or the fulfilment of public duties, to the more contemporary concern of justifying an individual's *avoidance* of public duties. Despite the breadth of this body of lit-

erature, an area remains understudied. And that is the theorisation of citizenship's futurism. The former is an aspect to the philosophy of citizenship which questions, among other areas, the future directions of the normative values associated with citizenship. Scholars (see for example Mossberger, Tolbert & McNeal, 2007; Taylor-Gooby, 2008; Isin & Nielsen, 2008; Rohrer, 2009) have certainly been projecting normative arguments about what

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it is to be a citizen, and how individuals can be better citizens, but there has not at this point been much focus exclusively on human enhancement technologies (HET) and democratic citizenship. The future of citizenship, one dependant on HET, is therefore the focus of this chapter. As Isaiah Berlin (1962) might argue, we need to articulate the future directions of our existing institutions, like citizenship, so that we can push for their improvement in clear and predetermined directions rather than leave institutions to ad hoc organic change. The act of articulating these future directions exposes contemporary political desires. It helps uncover the normative positions of those proposing the future directions. Importantly, visions of the future raise fundamental questions about the directions that institutions might possibly take. Raising questions is a central goal of this chapter.

As I understand it, there are two clear modes of writing about futurism, and, consequently, HET. The first discusses possible paths for humans in the far off future. Its scope is hundreds if not thousands of years ahead in time. The second discusses possible paths that are nearer in time. Its scope is days, years, or decades. Both are equally important. The first has seemingly more to do with Jules Verne or Isaac Asimov. It is an articulation of often extreme and imaginative realities set well into the future. These projections are useful as they help us, as humans, to come to terms with where we might like, or not like to, for example, take our institutions. This theorisation of the deep future of citizenship is, in scholarly literature, typically not the work of prophecy but rather either a dire warning that this future should be avoided or a beacon calling for its realisation. Depending on the subject, such as *mind uploading*,¹ we currently see expressions for both positions (avoid or realise).

For democratic citizenship, we can theorise some possibilities into the far off future. The following is an extreme example designed to stimulate thinking in this area. Progress in anti-aging research could lead to a group of ‘old’ humans, alive for several hundred years, who would have

experienced for example three or four times as many election campaigns as today’s average life-span human. The potential spin-off effects of this type of change are many. For example, will this create a class of ‘guardian’ citizens – a new type of elite? The act of dying, of generational change, can be a key player in political transformations. The argument goes that in some political systems there will be powerful elites with stubbornly held beliefs, rather than evidence-based rational positions, and thus change can only peacefully happen once these types of elites die. Dead elites are replaced by living ones who might be more progressive, or moderate, or democratic. So what happens to the pacing of the political change pegged to human life spans when ideologues for example will remain alive – possibly for centuries? In a competitive multi-party electoral democracy it is conceivable that these elites will simply not be re-elected and may, rather, become marginalized for being overly conservative or illogical as human development progresses. Ideologues will be left behind.² But what about in non-democratic places like North Korea – these closed totalitarian states where dynastic change, and the space for political rupture out of totalitarianism, happens mostly through the death of the great leader? What if Kim Il Sung, for example, were still alive today?

The example given above is just one articulation of the problems HET can cause for democratic politics. But this and other possible problems do not crowd this hypothetical horizon. There are also boons for democracy to be found in at least this one articulation of its deep future. Progress, for example, in neuroscience research could lead to an implanted brain-to-computer interface where humans can access the Internet in their minds (Berger et al., 2008; Tan & Nijholt, 2010; Graimann, Pfurtscheller, & Allison, 2010). If electronic voting were by that point long-standardised, humans could possibly discharge a flurry of civic duties from anywhere in the world and with little effort. Further, parents could decide to have their children’s genotype ‘arranged’ to maximize intelli-

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