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Philosophy for a New Civilisation

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Technology as a Slayer of Democracy

1. The Ambiguous Legacy of the French Revolution

"Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains."

With these words, Rousseau starts his *Social Contract*. Rousseau's ideas reverberate with freedom. In due time, they become the dynamite for the Revolution.

The great French Revolution was fought in the name of liberty and freedom. This revolution was announcing the dawn of a new era. However, the dream of the revolution came only partly true. The revolution turned into a nightmare in a double sense. In the political sense, just after it happened in France. And in a larger—social and human sense, two centuries later.

I will argue in this chapter that during the last two centuries we have witnessed, on the global scale, the repeat of the tragedy, which happened in France a few years after the Revolution. Thus I will argue that the promise of liberty and freedom, which the Revolution had proclaimed, has been vitiated and fundamentally unfulfilled. The dialectics of freedom is never easy. It has been particularly ambiguous and double-edged when Democracy became a close ally of technology and together they embarked on a new era of freedom.

As we all know, the great French Revolution signified not only the bloodbath of the reigning aristocracy. Very soon, it became a bloodbath for the revolutionaries themselves. The great terror gradually killed all the leaders. The revolution was

devouring its own children. The machine of the Revolution, the guillotine, once released, was relentlessly killing; as if it were, by its own will; and according to its own imperative. The premise of the great freedom became the reality of a great terror.

By and large, we do not see (and we do not want to see) any parallels between the terror of the Great Revolution and the gradually increasing terror of technology during the last two centuries, and particularly during the last fifty years. Yet the parallels are quite striking. Like the Revolution, technology was meant to be a great liberator, and like the Revolution, it is now capable of killing us all. It hasn't killed us yet. But the fact that it has this potential, is quite chilling. Once the machine of the Revolution (the guillotine) was set up, there was no way to stop it. Is it not similar with technology, which, although in a more subtle and attenuated form, is a relentless slayer of our liberty, of social cohesion, and of our individual inner lives? It is this aspect that I wish to explore in some depth.

We are celebrating the achievements of the French Revolution. We are celebrating the achievements of Democracy. We are celebrating the achievements of technology. In these celebrations we must not ignore the darker side of the picture. We must ask ourselves whether the technological revolution, in the midst of which we are presently living, is not creating a similar legacy the French Revolution left behind—the legacy of the guillotine relentlessly chopping the heads which are on its way? Perhaps chopping the heads is too strong a term—extinguishing the soul and emptying the heart of men would be more appropriate.

Now the French philosophers of the Enlightenment were ideologues. They were more interested in influencing public opinion than in deep search for truth. They were brilliant conversationalists rather than profound thinkers. With the exception of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was Swiss after all.

Among French philosophers of the Enlightenment, there was nobody of the stature of Emmanuel Kant—who, although inspired by their ideal, was a thinker digging deep and confronting the great problems, which the scientific world view has brought about. Among these problems were: If science provides

indubitable and ultimate truths; and if empiricism, which is the epistemological vanguard of science, is right, namely that all knowledge is acquired through the senses, then how is scientific knowledge possible? What is the nature of this knowledge? Let us be absolutely clear about the problem. If empiricism holds good (and if it is the case that knowledge acquired through the senses is unreliable, as the senses are unreliable), then it is obvious that knowledge acquired via the empiricist vehicle cannot be final, absolute, indubitable. If, on the other hand, the knowledge of physics is final and irrevocable, then it could not have been the product of the senses. This was the dilemma which Kant confronted magnificently, and to which he found a magnificent solution.

This was one problem. The other problem was: what is the status of the human person in the world defined by science, which is deterministic, prearranged, and clad in the iron cast of physical laws? What is the role of morality in the deterministic scheme of the universe? Again Kant confronted the dilemma with clarity and incisiveness as he declared: "the starry heaven above you; and the moral law within you." The moral law lies in the sovereignty of the individual. The human being is a sovereign. The human universe, with its moral and spiritual dimensions, is not reducible to the deterministic stuff of science.

The French philosophers were not concerned with fundamental problems. They assumed that all was well, and Science and Reason were the solution to all problems. They were propagators and popularizers of science and the scientific world view. They didn't see any problems with science and reason. They wore rosy spectacles of the scientific-technological optimism.

The whole culture was intoxicated with science and its achievements. Moliere beautifully satirizes the fascination with science in his play, *The Learned Ladies*, in which he shows science invading not only fashionable boudoirs but also the chambers of servant girls. In the French salons of the 18th century, particularly those attended by Encyclopaedists, science is one of the main subjects of conversation. Voltaire's mistress, madame du Chatelet, wrote a very lucid and learned account of Leibnitz'

philosophy under the title: *Institutions de Physique*, of which La Mettrie said, "Everybody understands monads since the Leibnizians made the brilliant acquisition of Madame du Chatelet." In Madame du Chatelet's salon the charming Venetian fellow, Algarotti, presented and discussed his book, *Newtonianism For the Ladies*. The learned diest, Voltaire and Madame du Chatelet, were slightly shocked by the frivolous tone of the narrative and by too many jokes in the text. However, *Newtonianism* in a curious way epitomizes the obsession with the triumphant march of science.

Now, Voltaire's philosophy itself was not really profound. Voltaire was a brilliant conversationalist, but far from a deep, let alone an original thinker. This became the legacy of the Encyclopaedists: brilliant talk but not much substance.

Voltaire was very vocal about liberty, including liberties of others. He was supporting all kinds of good causes, and sometimes financed them as well. But his moral conscience seems to be in doubt. For he was an arms dealer, making huge amounts of money on trading in weapons. There is at least some moral ambiguity here: to propound the philosophy of liberation, to raise one's voice in the name of liberty for others—while procuring the arms trade...the result of which must be the killing of others. Voltaire's conscience does not seem to have bothered him. Voltaire was not a particularly moral person. He didn't think that morality had much to do with liberation. This moral ambiguity is something we have inherited from the French Enlightenment. It is also inherent in Marxism, which was profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment.

What I am suggesting is that we have inherited from the Enlightenment not only some specific ideas concerning the great importance of Reason and the beneficial role of science and technology in human affairs. We also inherited a considerable ambiguity about the role of morality in the human world. Somehow we have been persuaded by the dictum of the Enlightenment: morality is for the church. For the enlightened man—it is material progress. This has become our credo.

I said that the Encyclopaedists were brilliant talkers without much substance behind it. Yet it would be unfair to say that

they were just talkers. They had a project. And an important one, for that matter. This was the *Encyclopaedia*. The *Encyclopaedia* was the stupendous undertaking to envisage and to complete.

The thirty-five volume *Encyclopaedia of Useful Knowledge* was a triumph of human industry and of perseverance. The project was based on a philosophy. It was the Baconian philosophy. Bacon insisted that the ancient knowledge was but a boyhood of knowledge. It could speak but it could not generate. It was full of words but barren of works. He wanted knowledge that is potent of works, knowledge that is useful. And that is precisely what the Encyclopaedists meant to provide. They considered the *Encyclopaedia* to be the ultimate compilation of all useful knowledge that the human race could amass. A laughable claim from our perspective; but a noble one at the time.

The Encyclopaedists were so busy collecting useful knowledge that they did not have time and energy to think about deeper questions. This has become the hallmark of the entire technological/scientific civilization. We have been so busy gathering useful knowledge and improving our material condition that we have forgotten what the ultimate purpose of it all is, particularly as related to the life of beauty, dignity and meaning. It is in this sense that I consider the legacy of the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution to be a double edged sword. The ideals were noble, particularly as seen against the oppressive background of the church and the ruling aristocracy. However, in pursuing these ideals, we have cheapened our lives. We have been continuously acting. But our actions do not add up—to a life of meaning and coherence. The words of Macbeth are painfully relevant. Our actions are "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

2. The Insidious Role of Secularism

Let us look at the whole picture from a larger perspective. What we have to contend with, in our times, is not only a particular drama that has occurred as the result of the interplay between Democracy and technology. Both Democracy and technology have to be seen in a larger framework. This is the

framework of the post-Renaissance secularism, which has generated the Enlightenment. Together secularism and Enlightenment have shaped our ideas of Democracy and freedom.

Actually, we need to go a bit further back—to the very cradle of Democracy. There was no question in the Greek mind of the connection between freedom and Democracy. Indeed, it may be said that the Greeks invented Democracy to safeguard freedom. The intelligent and enlightened man chooses to live in a Polis. And the best way of arranging the Polis—for the sake of the fullness of life and of safeguarding freedom—is Democracy.

Let us be mindful that under the auspices of secularism we have tried to de-sacralize the physical universe; and then the meaning of Democracy and freedom. We have somehow persuaded ourselves that the three concepts: secularism-Democracy-technology are inherently connected and co-define each other. That is not how the meaning of Democracy was envisaged by the ancient Greeks: they did not tie Democracy either to secularism or to science/technology. It is important for us to bear this in mind.

Let me spell out one of my main theses: *in imposing the harness of secularism on Democracy we have distorted its meaning; and in the process we have impoverished the ideal of freedom.* Secularism has been a disaster for Western culture in so many ways; and it has been a misfortune for Democracy as well, as Democracy has become subsumed under the imperatives of technology.

Confusing Democracy with the domination of technology has been one of the unfortunate aspects of our secular age. This confusion has pervaded our political thinking to such a degree that we simply expect technology to be a liberator and never a slayer of Democracy. When confronted with facts, we are continually surprised, if not confounded. We so often assume that the expansion of technology is synonymous with the expansion of freedom and of Democracy. But it isn't synonymous. It wasn't conceived by the Greeks as synonymous. Only in our post-Enlightenment thinking we tried to make it synonymous. It is time to dismantle this whole composition which inherently ties Democracy with secularism and technology.

The 19th century discovered that "God is dead," that man is unable to live with the traditional images of God. The 20th century has discovered that man cannot live without God, without some spiritual sustenance and larger transcendental horizons. We are now aware that secularism breeds emptiness, out of which arises nihilism, relativism, and an atrophy of values. When we ponder over the meaning of Democracy in our times, let us be aware that the cherished post-Enlightened schema: Technology → progress → Democracy → Freedom, simply does not work.

In a famous passage (in the Social Contract) Rousseau maintains that if there were a nation of gods, Democracy would be a suitable form of government for them; human beings are too imperfect to govern themselves democratically. This passage of Rousseau is usually taken on its face value. Democracy is too perfect a form of government for humans; and indeed to unattainable. Yet, there is another, more fruitful and deeper interpretation of this passage. In aspiring to Democracy, we are elevating ourselves over and beyond the cruel and unjust forms of government characteristic of tyrannies. In aspiring to Democracy we are divinizing the human society; we are in a sense putting ourselves on an equal footing with gods. Such an interpretation would not only be endorsed by Socrates and Plato. They would insist that this is a true interpretation of Democracy—as an instrument enabling freedom, and indirectly helping man in his quest of self-perfectibility leading to Godhead.

Let us draw some conclusions. Democracy and spiritual aspirations were not antithetical to each other for the ancient Greeks, but indeed aspects of each other. Democracy was the social structure helping the individual man to attain freedom and spiritual enlightenment—leading to liberation.

We have completely forgotten about this aspect of Democracy in our times. Instead, we have tied Democracy to the quest of technology. But the imperatives of Democracy and technology are different. Technology aims at efficiency and control, and often domination; which in our times increasingly means control over nature, and over all living systems, including human beings. The quintessential imperative of Democracy is

the enhancement of human freedom, including spiritual freedom. When the technological imperative is given a free reign, it becomes antithetical to the imperative of Democracy. At such a time, technology becomes a slayer of Democracy.

3. A New Agenda for Democracy

Nowadays Democracy seems to be an irrelevance. Everybody pays a lip service to it but hardly anybody thinks that it works any more. We treat Democracy as a venerable shell which we admire as we admire ancient monuments.

Yet, the power contained in the idea of Democracy is still enormous. Why? Partly because it is a spiritual ideal, or perhaps we could even call it—a religious ideal. Similarly as with so many other religious and ethical ideals lies exactly in their transcendent reach. We consider them immensely worthy. We aspire to them, although most of the time we fail to embody them in our lives. Let's put it simply: the enduring power of the idea of Democracy lies in its spiritual content. Democracy does not only spell out equality as such. This very equality has deeper attributes: it is an essential ingredient of our freedom; and, on a higher level, of our sense of dignity, of our nobility and indeed of our divinity.

With the twilight and demise of technological Democracy, strangled by the tentacles of secularism, it is time to restore Democracy's ancient spiritual meaning. We need to return not only to the concept of Democracy as "power for the people." For both the meaning of 'power' and of 'people' need to be re-examined.

The idea of 'power' has been distorted and perverted by the Faustian concept of power—you only live once, therefore you live dangerously, and at whosever expense; usually by attempting to have power over things and over people. Power then becomes a spectacle of domination for the sake of the aggrandizement of one's ego. That was not the meaning of *cratia* and *demos* in the original conception of *demo-cratia*.

We need to re-sacralize the universe, and in the process re-sacralize the concept of power, including one which is a component of *Demo-cracy*. We cannot treat the universe as a

heap of inexhaustible natural resources to be exploited to our benefit. We cannot treat other people contemptuously, which happens when we treat them as objects and pawns of our power games. To stop those fundamental processes of degradation of both the universe and of ourselves, we need much more than a re-distribution of power, or a re-distribution of justice—while the old paradigm of power, dominated by technology-triumphant is controlling our destiny.

Re-thinking secularism does not mean a better secularism. It means a fundamental realization that secularism has become a blind alley, that we are spiritually strangled by it. In the wake of this process we suffer the fallout of a shrunken concept of man and of the universe, and a cheapened conception of Democracy.

Re-thinking secularism means a re-enchantment of the world, a re-sacralization of nature and Cosmos, a re-introduction of spirituality to the content of our lives. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. In the great spiritual traditions of the past we have ready blueprints.

Let us realize that it is not a negation of reason to insist that we should treat all nature and the entire cosmos reverentially—because it is a sacred universe in which we are dwelling. From the sacredness of the ground of all being follows a reverential treatment of nature (no longer to be ruthlessly exploited as the result of our power trip), of other people (no longer to be treated as objects of our Faustian quests) of Democracy (no longer to be subdued to the imperatives of manipulative technology). It is time to change our spectacles and realize that the cosmos is not a quarry but a cradle and a nursery of our lives and our dreams, including one of a fair life.

The broadening of the concept of Democracy, to include its cosmic underpinning and enriching it by returning to its ancient spiritual roots, may be necessary for resurrecting the now dying ideal. It may also be a part of the process of our self-renewal. We become in the image of concepts we have created. If concepts become progressively empty and their symbolic content dies of atrophy, we slowly die with the symbolic products of our minds.

The renewal of Democracy, or a form of government which would serve its original intent—of enlarging man's freedom and of helping him/her on the path of spiritual enlightenment is a more vital task for our times than the invention of a new technology or an introduction of another utilitarian scheme of distributive justice, for such schemes and such technologies are but servants of the crippling secularist formation.

Summary

Democracy is a noble concept that has undergone various transformations during the last 25 centuries. Democracy is one of the modalities of human social experience. It can be renewed if and when human beings, collectively and deliberately, embark on a new form of social praxis. I have suggested that a renewal of Democracy lies in its spiritual regeneration, for, to begin with, Democracy was a concept serving spiritual ends.

Technology and Democracy are not aspects of each other. Nor do they co-define each other. In technological Democracy of our times, technology triumphs while Democracy suffers. In brief, technology is a slayer of Democracy. Technological Democracy is a progeny of larger forces and ideologies. It is a child whose parents are secularism and the French Enlightenment. Secularism, although it was once a liberating force, is now a crippling conceptual disease. Secularism is a culprit responsible for the demise of Democracy, which originally was conceived to spiritual ends. Democracy was a part of the process of divinizing the human society, whereby by inventing an 'ideal' political system, we tried to govern ourselves in a manner "suitable for gods" as Rousseau would put it.

Modern technology, especially in the 20th century, has been profoundly undemocratic. It has served the elites. It was invented by the elites. And the main financial rewards were reaped by the elites. The spread of Technology did not signify the spread of democratic values but rather profit and domination. In controlling the markets through the spread and dissemination of technologies—by the powerful financial elites—the democratic aspirations of unprivileged countries were not helped. For modern technology to be truly democratic and serving democratic values, we need to abolish patents and patent laws. Otherwise,

market forces will be continually upsetting Democracy and the democratic process.

A fundamental renewal of Democracy is possible. But it will have to go hand in hand with a fundamental renewal of our thinking and our basic assumptions. We have to overcome secularism by re-introducing to Democracy its (presently missing) spiritual dimension. Secondly, we need to place Democracy in a larger context. This context, I claim, should be cosmocracy. A further discussion of Cosmocracy, as superseding Democracy, is carried out in chapter 19.