

Dismantling the Machine: Rethinking Technology in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

Since the Industrial Revolution, both mainstream and heterodox understandings of technological progress have been distorted by the dualistic modern worldview which separates the material from the social. Technologies developed since the late eighteenth century differ from earlier forms of technology by being as dependent on world market prices of labor, land, and other biophysical resources as on human inventiveness. Modern people continue to view technology as ingenuity applied to features inherent in nature, while ignoring the extent to which it is contingent on the asymmetric exchange of resources in global society. An illusion produced by nature/society dualism is that the economy can be understood without knowledge of nature, whereas technology can be accounted for without knowledge of world society. Although inextricably entwined in the real world, the phenomena studied by economics and engineering are kept conceptually separate. This is achieved by disregarding the materiality of world trade. The global predicament of the Anthropocene prompts us to acknowledge that modern technologies are not just instruments for solving problems but social strategies for redistributing time and space in world society, displacing work and environmental loads to sectors of the world-system where wages are lower and environmental legislation less rigorous. It is becoming increasingly evident that the more expensive technologies are, the fewer people will have access to them and the more resources they will require. Technology is not extraneous to social theory. A rethinking of technological progress along these lines finally suggests that the widespread visions of a transition to post-carbon technologies are incompatible with current levels of consumption and energy use in the Global North.

Bio

Alf Hornborg received his Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Uppsala and has taught at Uppsala, the University of Gothenburg, and at Lund University. He has conducted field research in Nova Scotia, Peru, and Brazil. His primary research interest is the cultural and political dimensions of human-environmental relations in past and present societies, particularly from the perspective of world-system analysis. This has led him to explore various perspectives not only from anthropology but also from trans-disciplinary fields such as environmental history, ecological economics, political ecology, and development studies. The central ambition has been to examine how specific cultural assumptions constrain human approaches to economics, technology, and ecology, and how such assumptions tend to serve as ideologies that reproduce social relations of power. His books include *The Power of the Machine* (2001), *Global Ecology and Unequal Exchange* (2011), *Global Magic* (2016), and *Nature, Society, and Justice in the Anthropocene* (2019).