

Book Review

Richard E. Sclove

Democracy and Technology

New York: The Guilford Press, 1995

Steven Fraser and Joshua B. Freeman

Audacious Democracy: Labor, Intellectuals and the Social Reconstruction of America

Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Thirty-three years ago, I rose with several thousand others to applaud a speaker as he completed an address infused with philosophical and political thought in the unlikely venue of the University of Toronto's hockey rink, Varsity Arena. The speaker was the late George Grant, a conservative, a Canadian nationalist and an outspoken tragedian of technology. One sentence from his speech stood out: "Democracy," he said, "is not a concept that is compatible with vast technological empires." If, as inhabitants of a globalized technological society, we accept Grant's view, it only remains to discover if this society is also an "empire" to determine whether or not our putative democracy is a reality or an illusion.

I have spent much of the past three decades and more worrying about the sentence that the unapologetically judgemental George Grant passed upon us that day. Much of this worrying has taken the theoretical form of inquiry into the meaning of words such as democracy, technology and empire. Some of it has taken the form of practical political action aimed at increasing the measure of democracy in whatever organizations I happened to find myself. I have not been entirely happy with the results of either endeavour, but I am grateful that I have found myself in good company, that I have not been alone.

So, as we trudge on toward the infamous year 2000 and (we may hope) beyond., Grant's mid-1960s decree retains and may even have gained salience. The relationship between politics and technology is, if anything, even more visible in the age of the computer chip than it was when napalm bombing was the "cutting edge" technology of destruction and Neil Armstrong had yet to take his "giant leap for mankind." New information seems to have eclipsed privacy, corporate demands seem to have undermined public policy, and what passes for politics has been reduced (at least in the United States) to a tiresome boudoir farce which endlessly distracts from issues such as the debate of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, a convergence of politics and information technology if there ever was one.

Canadians are particularly suited to examine such matters and attention will shortly be paid in this journal to some compelling contemporary Canadian thought on the matter. In the meantime, the two books here under review, constitute sensible starting points for those who choose to be optimistic about the potential for democratic politics in the time of global technology.

Democracy and Technology is one of a series of books on "the conduct of science" under the general editorship of Steve Fuller of the University of Pittsburgh's Department of Communication. It approaches its subject from a pleasantly moderate point of view. Disdaining both the epistemological inanity of "value-free" technology and the reductionist fallacy of technological determinism, Sclove sensibly argues that both "misperceptions concerning technologies actually enhance their relative structural significance, because they enable technologies to exert their influence with only limited social awareness of how, or even that, they are doing so."

Allowing that technology constitutes an influential, if not wholly determining, social structure, Sclove goes on to consider how this particular structure (especially in the form of information technology) relates to traditional questions of democratic theory. What, we are asked to ponder, is the optimal size of a democratic community? What are the minimal standards of an informed citizenry? Are there "communitarian/cooperative" technologies that would provide alternatives to today's monstrous business enterprises and public bureaucracies?

To his credit, Sclove does not wax fanciful about the possibilities of conducting daily plebiscites through the instrumentality of the world-wide web, nor does he give unqualified endorsement to the popular notion that "virtual communities." might one day replace territorially defined states as the predominant locus of democratic politics. The apparent anarchy of the Internet is plainly at odds with the emerging hegemony of corporate control over cyberspace; the outcome of the struggle is as yet unclear.

To his greater credit, Sclove provides concrete examples of political and economic alternatives to social giantism that give practical expression to the belief that technologically-mediated tyranny, while a clear and present danger, is not our necessary fate. From cooperative networks of small manufacturing firms in northern Italy to the nonprofit Center for Neighborhood Technology in Chicago, *Democracy and Technology* is replete with practical illustrations of innovations which permit the democratization of technology in small and medium-scale contexts. If this is less than a prophecy of a techno-democratic utopia, so much the better; breathless millenarian pronouncements are, or surely ought to be, passé.

As for the seemingly hegemonic institutions of transnational business and the state, Sclove insists that, "(a)t a minimum, they too should be reorganized into federations of quasi-autonomous, democratic divisions and subsidiaries." He is, however, realistic enough to acknowledge that, although some decentralization is taking place under the sway of strategic planning initiatives and reengineering programs, any claim that a more democratic ethos is accompanying such organizational restructuring is, at best, premature.

Content to illustrate small victories, to show how democracy can yet be served, the simple message of Richard Sclove's book, in his own words, is this: "it is possible to evolve societies in which people live in greater freedom, exert greater influence on their circumstances, and experience greater dignity, self-esteem, purpose, and well-being." Not a bad vision for a pragmatist.

Audacious Democracy is an entirely different project. The comment made by George Grant with which this review began was made at an international "Teach-in", with participants

ranging from former Guyanese Prime Minister Cheddi Jagan to future U.S. Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski. Their speeches were turned into a book (*Revolution and Response*, edited by Charles Hanly and published in 1966 by McClelland and Stewart). *Audacious Democracy* is similar, a collection of essays based on speeches to a 1996 Columbia University "Teach-in" dedicated to dialogue between intellectuals and labour activists. Featured in the collection are such progressive celebrities as Norman Birnbaum (founding editor of *New Left Review*), Betty Friedan (author of *The Feminine Mystique*), Todd Gitlin (pre-eminent sociologist of the sixties), Karen Nussbaum (former director of the Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor), John J. Sweeney (President of the AFL-CIO), and internationally known philosopher of pragmatism, Richard Rorty.

Those familiar with the work of any of these or the 16 other contributors will learn nothing new, just as (I suppose) those familiar with George Grant's oeuvre saw nothing remarkable in his remarks in the hockey arena. But that is not the point. What matters about collections such as these and the events that precipitate them is that people who might not otherwise talk (and listen) to each other are provided with genuine opportunities to teach one another.

The special importance of *Audacious Democracy* comes not from what it says but from the fact that it is said at all. As persuasive journalists such as Linda McQuaig tell us, there is a consciously promulgated myth of powerlessness in the global economy. Governments of all political hues have accepted with apparent equanimity the central facets of the market agenda: namely the fear of deficits, the vulnerability of social programs, the inescapably high levels of unemployment and the fiscal wisdom of privatization in all its forms. Confronted with a seeming consensus on the inevitability, if not the desirability, of the new political economy, there is a well-noted tendency to wallow in our impotence (not, as McQuaig has recently reminded us, a "real impotence but a self-imposed variety").

One enduring problem with the process of innovation is the relative dearth of comment from those who are disconnected from or even hostile to the process. Not so much the means but the ends of organizational change need to be debated. Intelligent forays by labour leaders, academics and others into areas of mutual interest are always welcome. In this case, they may be overdue. Yale labour historian David Montgomery put it nicely when he told the Columbia audience: "the essential things that make life worth living cannot be bought in the market. The comfort and sustenance people can offer each other, the formation of a child into a human being with a promising future for self and society, respect and a meaningful voice on the job, openness of thought and imagination, and a dignified old age - these things cannot be bought in the discount store. We can secure them only when we think and act together. That is what the public sector is all about. That is what collective action is all about."

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