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Catastrophic Technology in Cold War Political Thought, Caroline Ashcroft, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2024, (pp 253), £120 (Hardback), ISBN 9781399535014.

For the twenty-first century cynic, it is all too easy to identify the gap between overwhelming technological progress and the corresponding continuity of human anxiety and human immiseration. However, at least to a certain extent, this gap between progress and misery registers as an anomaly because the memory of a purportedly betrayed promise continues to persist. As is the cynic's common refrain, the futurists of the 1950s and 60s posited elaborate worlds to come where technology's emergent contribution to the well-being of mankind would only be limited by the human species' collective imagination. Why then did such dreams of emancipated horizons fail so farcically? While the angles for addressing this question are legion, something under considered in this vein are the insights that might be gleaned from those who produced profound accounts of 'techno-pessimism' in the same moment that techno-optimism occupied its highest heights. As Caroline Ashcroft has poignantly shown through her monograph *Catastrophic Technology in Cold War Political Thought* such contemporaneous visions of technological harm can, in an array of manifestations, be located in the meta-efforts of some of the twentieth century's most creative – and challenging – political, cultural, and philosophical thinkers.

Drawing upon Hannah Arendt, Gunther Andres, Hans Jonas, Jacque Ellul, Martin Heidegger, Max Horkhimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Lewis Mumford, *Catastrophic Technology* presents a wide range of figures both canonical and forgotten. While, as it quickly becomes apparent, any one of these individual theorist's thoughts on technology would warrant a monograph-length treatment, Ashcroft takes the opportunity to draw out the broader unifying themes that cut across their contributions. In Ashcroft's words, despite many disagreements on various details, '[c]ollectively, the writings of this group reveal how their largely cohesive understanding of technology was understood as a catastrophic force for modernity' (24). Proceeding from this basis, Chapter 1 broadly considers the biography and intellectual tradition of each thinker. While the context of twentieth-century German-speaking Jewish identity is exemplified by most of these thinkers and is tremendously relevant to operative conceptualisations of 'the catastrophic', this focus is productively complimented by how many core ideas similarly manifested in the (non-Jewish identity rooted) thoughts of a Frenchman (Ellul), an American (Mumford), and a Nazi (Heidegger).

Upon identifying its figures of inquiry, Chapter 2 of *Catastrophic Technology* presents an 'intellectual history of intellectual histories' that showcases how each thinker, in varying

capacities, traced the genealogy of the humanity-society-technology interface from antiquity to the detonation of the atomic bomb. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 then respectively turn to how the different thinkers applied and refined their techno-pessimistic understandings in relation to war, production, communications, and biology. Through such detailing emerges unifying themes on how, in contrast to any understanding of technology as ‘politically neutral’, technology, especially as a medium of homogenisation and totality, fundamentally reconfigures the human subject with the end of creating a reality where, contra technology existing to serve man, man exists to serve technology. Such themes are further unified and expanded upon in Chapter 8’s account of ‘technology and worldliness’ where amongst other articulations, within Cold War techno-pessimist thought, technology’s replacement of nature itself ushered in a new era of technological risk that humanity’s accumulated knowledge was ultimately powerless to confront. In her substantive conclusion, Ashcroft traces the influences of the above-detailed theorists of catastrophic technology on later discourses, including those of environmentalism and the ‘Anthropocene’, all while imploring the possible limits and continued relevance of catastrophic theories of technology presented throughout the book.

While *Catastrophic Technology* is undeniably impressive in its sheer scope and depth of engagement with thinkers who are not exactly known for their clarity and accessibility, one domain of inquiry it leaves open is how precisely the ‘Cold War’ might be conceptualised in relation to the production of catastrophic techno-pessimism. Importantly on this point, Ashcroft notes how, despite widespread fears of nuclear annihilation – a most defining of Cold War tropes – *Catastrophic Technology*’s protagonists identified technology’s dangers as something far more insidious than a singular destructive event. Rather, technology was poised to saturate every facet of human life and possible meaning, and this, rather than instant vaporisation or lingering radioactive fallout, was the true evil of the ascent of technological domination that the Cold War elevated beyond contestation. To consider this disjuncture between abrupt versus banal technology-related peril is to consider how the temporality of apocalypse is experienced differently by different people for different reasons.

Particularly from the overwhelmingly American standpoint that progressively globalised itself within the postwar order – as expressed through the proliferating science fiction of this milieu – the apocalypse would begin the moment nuclear escalation became irreversible and those who survived would inherit an irradiated ‘post-apocalypse’.¹ However, for those who saw the world they knew eradicated by the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust – as was the case with the overwhelming majority of *Catastrophic Technology*’s protagonists – how was the Cold War-era anything other than the aftermath of an apocalypse

that already occurred? As such, the technology of the Cold War, technology that was often itself the continued legacy of the production and innovation catalysed by the Second World War, sparked horror, not only for its destructive potential, but for how it cut off the possibility of regenerating the would-be ideals and institutions that could nurture true human freedom. After all, a common refrain amongst Ashcroft's protagonists was how, given the need for all regimes to respond to the imperatives created by technological progress, ostensibly different political systems – be they fascist, liberal democratic, or socialist – would be compelled to function along substantially similar lines ultimately serving technology's anti-humanist agenda. Given this purported eclipsing of possibility following apocalyptic devastation, rather than being the fire that burns the field, Cold War technology was the salt sowed upon the charred landscape to prevent all future harvests.

When tracing these past visions of the future into the present that came to be, many of the predictions formulated by *Catastrophic Technology*'s protagonists appear to be validated to a significant extent. Though the threat of nuclear obliteration never truly disappeared – and its likelihood markedly increased in recent years – today's technology related cynicism is far more inclined to centre how the ubiquitously banal operations of social media, data algorithms, and artificial intelligence have, in their intertwined machinations, triggered a general crisis of human subjectivity. While such a reality might appear to render Cold War-era techno-pessimism as a prophecy foretold, one must remember that, while they collectively created a generally cohesive vision, Ashcroft's thinkers of focus were far from the only theorists of technology to emerge in this era.² Such a consideration, especially as it concerns individualised experiences of catastrophe, is exceedingly important should one endeavour to account for intellectual history in global terms.

In a brief, but highly important passage, Ashcroft notes that the '...critique of technological colonialism, and the negative solidarity of technology places the critics of technology in tension with anticolonial thinkers such as Léopold Senghor or Franz Fanon who viewed technology and modernisation as a means of attaining liberation and political independence' (199). With this observation of the Senegalese President and Martinique revolutionary comes the prospect of engaged dialogue with another contemporary tradition of thinking about technology that was also shaped by profound experiences of violence. However, unlike Ashcroft's protagonists who experienced violence as an acutely totalising loss of a world that once provided comfort, security, and opportunity for flourishing, for racialised and colonised individuals such as Senghor and Fanon, the world that produced them as subjects was a world premised on their degradation and dehumanisation. As such, for them and the

many like them born in such conditions, the political goal was not the return to a world lost (a return prevented by technology's entrenchment of the 'post-apocalypse') but rather the creation of a fundamentally new world as decolonisation dawned. Technology, the burdens and benefits of which were systematically maldistributed under colonial conditions, would doubtlessly have an important role to play in the process of 'worldmaking after empire' – a reality attested to in debates surrounding a transformative 'New International Economic Order' in the 1970s.³ Relatedly, such postcolonial discourses on technology contained alternative visions of global ethics that directly confronted catastrophic potentialities as newly independent states proclaimed that, contra the recklessness of nuclear-armed superpowers, those who cherished their long-denied freedom were best positioned to offer responsible global leadership.⁴

The opportunity for such engagement on how different experiences of destruction and degradation manifests through different characterisations of technology is a testament to the power of Ashcroft's book. Such lines of conceptualisation can hardly be more important today as struggles over technological supremacy within a shifting geopolitical order presents its participants with innumerable opportunities to mobilise victim narratives in justifying respective bids for domination.⁵ What new ethics of responsibility are demanded in light of such realities? While this question allows for no simple answers, perhaps there is some comfort to be gained in recognising our present anxieties in relation to their deeper lineages. If there is even a small amount of truth to this then there is much value to be acquired from the articulations of those who struggled with questions of technology under the heaviest burdens of melancholia – especially if we refuse to conflate melancholia with despair.⁶ *Catastrophic Technology* is peerless in its vast explication and synthesis of such iconically melancholic articulations.

Eric Loefflad

University of Kent

E.D.Loefflad@kent.ac.uk

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¹ See e.g., Stewart, *Earth Abides*; Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

² Other thinkers might include: 'Daniel Bell, Hans Blumenberg, Albert Borgmann, Bernard Charbonneau, Michel Foucault, Pierre Francastel, Erich Fromm, Arnold Gehlen, Siegfried Gideon, George Grant, Jurgen Habermas, Ivan Illich, Karl Jaspers, Reinhart Koselleck, Marshall McLuhan or Leo Strauss' (24).

³ Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire*, 142–175.

⁴ Parfitt, 'Newer Is Truer,' 49, 58–60.

⁵ See Lim, *Victim Nationalism*.

⁶ See Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia*.