

## Latin American Cosmotechnics?

A Conversation with Yuk Hui

### Part II: Decolonization and Recomposition

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*AG/HE: You mentioned that cosmotechnics is a project of decolonization. In this sense, it is important to question the idea of the imaginary of the human at the center of western technological development. Would you say this is the politics of cosmotechnics? How does cosmotechnics relate to institutionalized forms of power and the integration of such forms into algorithmic/technocratic governance? We observe the relation of big tech companies like Facebook in their involvement with governmental enterprises—like the one involving Cambridge Analytica—and the amalgamation of a notion of the cosmos as standing reserve—like Amazon Blue Origin and Tesla SpaceX, which you have mentioned before. All of these entanglements of tech and the nation state seem to serve both the vision of modernity and of the human, which cosmotechnics puts into question. With all of this in mind, do you think it is possible to re-establish a political horizon which goes beyond the nation state, departing from cosmotechnics, or are these terms opposed? Here, we are specifically thinking of the Chilean 1970s project Cybersyn, that was embedded within forms of institutional power but sought to establish an informational environment that would give space for bottom-up forms of organization, utilizing statistical methods of computing for perhaps a naively termed “learning mechanism for the people.” Would it be possible to say that the analysis proposed above, when based on cosmotechnics, could lead to new state formations, or would you rather say that state projects are necessarily linked to the idea of nations and are, as such, in principle incompatible with cosmotechnics?*

**YH:** To respond to your question, we will have to make two fundamental claims, and to show why they are valid. Firstly, all political theories presuppose their anthropology, that is to say: what is human; and how did human beings come together and form a society? This is why in modern political philosophy, for example, Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke and many others, we always find a treatise on human nature first. Today, we have anthropology, archeology, paleontology, and other disciplines, which allow us to investigate into the formation of society by gathering traces dispersed on the Earth; however, in the time of Hobbes and Rousseau, it was a combination of logical deduction, theology, speculation and hearsay. Hobbes’ state of nature, as we are told in his *Leviathan*, was “proved”, so to speak, by the reports on the

Indians in America. Secondly, all anthropologies presuppose their concepts of technology and the role of technology in the process of hominization. In the classical era, there was no such discipline called anthropology, but there are theories about the role of technologies in the concept of the human, the formation of human society and the necessary changes in response to the improvements of the means of production. There we also encounter the question of morality; for example, is the use of technology for mastering nature or is the use of technology for facilitating the growth of both human and non-human beings. This is why—as I explained earlier—I coined the term cosmotechnics; it was in order to show that both the concept and the role of technology differ from one culture to another. Therefore, we see that the presupposed human nature and its relation to the environments and to other human and non-human beings are fundamental to the construction of a political theory. This is also why some anthropologists, such as my old friend David Graeber, attempt to reject the dominant political thought by going back to anthropology, and to show that, for example, economy didn't start with a barter system, which is told in every economy textbook; on the contrary, Graeber tried to show that the gift economy (which we can also find a stronger cosmological meaning, for example in the work of Marcel Mauss as well as Georges Bataille) was not only more fundamental, but also that it contains a logic of anti-accumulation. When I say decolonization, it is precisely the attempt to show that the “form of life” which we have taken for granted as the only option, and the way we understand technological progress as something linear are indeed problematic from the beginning.

Was Cybersyn a fundamental response to this problem or was it simply a new form of technocracy, was it just a planned liberal economy? These are questions I cannot answer definitively, because historians working on the Cybersyn project are more qualified to answer. We know that, especially after the Cybersyn project became well known, there were also similar projects in the Soviet Union and in China, attempts to show how machine-aided scientific planning is important for the realization of a socialist economy. However, machines are not neutral, machines embed and participate in social relations, sometimes hardcoded (for example, Facebook), sometimes mediated (for example, closed machines in the time of Marx), as are political theories; machines and institutions are that which realize a political thought, and this is also why Hegel was able to claim that it is only in the political state that freedom is realized.

*AG/HE: Would you say that the aim of cosmotechnics is, among other things, to show the contingency of any form of life, or rather the different narratives of how humans and techniques become expressively manifest? Independent of the institutionalized forms of power of which Hegel was very fond of, it seems that there is some truth in Hegel's concept of objective spirit, in that it is within the externalization of concepts—shared concepts—where the commonality of a collective is realized, which enables it to act together. So, in that sense, Hegel's objective spirit would be compatible with anthropological ideas, such as the one of Leroi Gourhain,*

*where externalization is that which brings humanity to bring forward all its technical possibilities. Yet within the contemporary establishment of hard technocracy, how can we avoid falling prey to the regulatory dynamics proper to second order cybernetics, such as the one proposed by Luhmann and dissected by Lyotard, where all efforts for structural reformation, and even “crises, strikes, unemployment and political revolutions” are always already neutralized by the optimization in the performativity of a unifying system?*

*We wonder if it is desirable to multiply the forms of institutionalization of power according to diverse cosmological and natural orders—in a sense in which we would be guided by a principle of the multiplication of diversity (normativity)—or are we rather only observers of technical and human evolution (description). If we are only observers of an already given multiplicity, what would guide our actions and give us reasons to act in a certain form? Considering, for example, the homogenizing form of techno-capitalism, it seems that diversification would indeed be a form of resistance. But was diversity ever gone?*

YH: Indeed, Hegel was interested in externalization, and Hegel was able to understand the relation between the spirit and its externalization, probably more conscious than his contemporaries, such as Schelling and the other romantics, since for the latter nature is the ground. However, we also have to ask if Hegel did give us a history of externalization in relation to the spirit? I doubt it. What concerns Hegel was primarily how the dialectics could represent the historical progress logically—and here logic is prior to history, something Hegel admitted in his analysis from family to civil society and finally to the state, where a logical sequence is prior to a temporal sequence, because history doesn't evolve like this! Instead, we read in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that the concept is time, namely time is the possibility of the concept, therefore historical time is only conceivable via the concept. It doesn't mean that Hegel didn't notice the complexification of externalization, but for him, such complexification is only the expression of the degree of self-consciousness of the spirit, not vice versa. What interests me is the histories of externalization, which is also the process of evolution, the complexification of the exosomatic organs, and its relation to the spirit. That is to say, the history of technodiversity and noodiversity and the relation between them.

If we say, following Gotthard Günther that Hegel anticipated cybernetics, then couldn't we also say that Hegel anticipated Luhmann's technocracy? So it is not that it was good in Hegel and bad in Luhmann. And indeed scholars such as Hans Ulrich Grumbrecht asked if Luhmann was a modern Hegelian; this is beyond our intention to clarify. However, your question is still too big to answer. Too big that one cannot even say anything significant. But let me try to interpret your question in my own way: given the fact that the technocracy you mentioned took an “organic form,” and becomes a homogenous and totalizing system (which we may call a Hegelian state), then how can we fragment the system or how can we pluralize the system? The question is in itself very difficult because first of all, we don't know

what the best system is contrary to what technocrats pretend to know, so we might already come to the end even before we figure out one. We can speculate on what we don't know, but we must not pretend that we already knew. And indeed we know that we don't know as Socrates said; however, in spite of the difficulty to access the truth, we still have to analyze the present historically and polemically. Given the fact that such a question is not immediately (and probably will be not) answerable, we can speculate on the plurality of systems. Without without pluralizing it, we cannot even move a step further, not even to mention to move out of it. Therefore pluralization is the first step, a strategic step, maybe we could say. But pluralization is only the beginning, because it belongs to the process of decomposition. Decolonization is also a decomposition; decolonization can not be the end because after decomposition, there will be recomposition, a recomposition of thinking. This was precisely what I attempted to sketch in *Art and Cosmotechnics*.