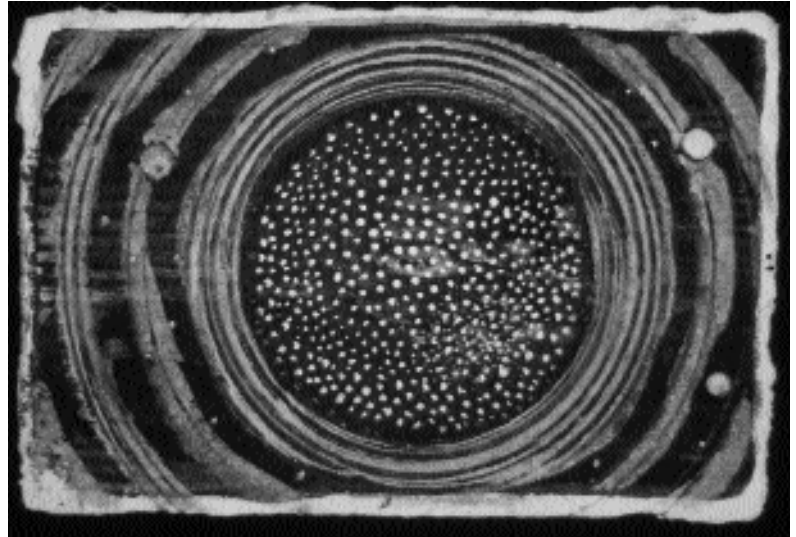


# The *Lack* of Technological Progress

David R. Loy



It is not too soon to observe that the Industrial Revolution may not be living up to its advertising, at least in terms of human contentment, fulfillment, health, sanity, and peace. And it is surely creating terrible and possibly catastrophic impacts on the earth. Technotopia seems already to have failed, but meanwhile it continues to lurch forward, expanding its reach and becoming more arrogant and dangerous. (Mander 1991, 7)

**V**iewed from the outside, the most striking characteristic of the West has been its dynamism, its preoccupation with growth and domination. Viewed from the inside, this same characteristic appears as our belief in progress—particularly, in the last four centuries, our faith in the benefits of scientific and technological development. Without this belief, it would be very difficult to justify many of the consequences of this dynamism: vast ecological destruction, the subjugation of other cultures, the social degradation of our own communities, and so forth. If, however, these are all the side effects of progress—well, you can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs! Sure, technological developments sometimes create problems, but fortunately there are also technological solutions for them. In other words, the cure for progress is more progress. And that

is just as well, because we all know—or have been encouraged to believe—that you cannot stop progress.

## The Goal of Progress

The English word progress is derived from the Latin *pro-gressus*, “to go forward.” But what makes our direction forward rather than backward, or sideways? How do we know which way we are actually going? If we want to keep the metaphor, if it is to be useful at all, then that progress must be measured in relation to somewhere we want to get to: a goal. Technological and social developments that bring us closer to that goal mean we are progressing. Developments that do not bring us closer to that goal cannot be considered progressive, and if they make that goal more difficult to achieve, they are regressive.

This is not an abstract issue. Looking back over the history of previous civilizations, we see that some cultures have been destroyed by other cultures and some have destroyed themselves, often by damaging their ecological bases. If we ourselves are progressing, it must mean, at the least, that we are not following in their footsteps: our progress means we are doing something different and better, which will qualify our civilization for a different and better destiny. But what is that special destiny we are progressing toward?

If we have no idea what that special destiny might be, because we do not know what the goal of our progress is, then the metaphor “progress” becomes problematic. As this suggests, the first question to consider is not whether we are going where we want to go, but a more fundamental one: Are we headed toward any goal at all? If not, what can progress, of any sort, mean? And what does the lack of a goal imply about our preoccupation with progress?

The fact that such questions are so awkward to ask, and so difficult to answer, makes me wonder whether we might be motivated by something else. Perhaps we are not going *to* somewhere, but going away *from* somewhere—from something that we do not want. If so, it would have important implications for our understanding of progress. If one wants to get away from something, it is obvious that there may be different ways to do so, several different routes one can take. But then, to decide which is the best route, it is important to have a good understanding of what it is we are trying to get away from. Otherwise, we may end up going in a direction that is still haunted by the thing-we-want-to-evade.

The worst-case scenario is that we end up dragging with us the thing we want to get away from, tied to our tail, as it were. That may seem a strange way

to put it, but not if the thing we want to escape turns out to be *us*—that is, some aspect of ourselves. In that case, self-understanding becomes more urgent than any “progress” we might make without such self-knowledge. The reason is that such progress is likely to have some quite unprogressive side effects. As psychotherapists know, when we do not understand what motivates us, our actions tend to be compulsive. Does that say something about our present fascination with technological progress and the unexpected deleterious effects that so often seem to follow?

Technological and economic development has often been promoted by technocrats as leading to a wonderful future of (for example) clean and comfortable high-rise buildings where new forms of transportation whisk us wherever we want to go—remember the 1970s TV show *The Jetsons*? That simplistic fantasy did not spring fresh into the minds of its cartoonists. Its roots were in the vision of a technological cornucopia (or “cornutopia”) promoted in the late 1940s and 1950s—when, we were told, nuclear power would soon provide us with electricity too cheap to meter.

Those technocratic visions never presented a society “in transit,” one experiencing accelerating and destabilizing social change. Rather, they depicted the future as a stable world where society is well organized and people feel secure and happy. Is that, then, the goal we are progressing toward? If so, it seems to bear little relation to the way we experience technological development today. Our social, economic, and natural environments are changing so rapidly that “future shock” is becoming an increasing problem for many of us. Contrary to fantasies of a stable technocratic society, there is no sign of change slowing down.

Is there something odd about that incongruity? Given the unprecedented and extraordinary level of comfort and convenience enjoyed by so many in the developed world, including all of those who decide which way the developed world will continue to develop, why is it that Western technological, economic, and social change continues to accelerate, rather than decelerating toward a more stable state? Since it is also

increasingly obvious that the pace of change has itself become problematic, why can’t we slow down? The pace is not frantic because we are so eager to share the benefits of Western development; the technical as well as economic gulf between developed and underdeveloped societies continues to widen. Meanwhile, almost everyone in the developed world grumbles about the speed of life and the lack of time.

That we do not seem to be progressing toward any particular future world, stable or not, and that there seems to be

cannot find some destination we are headed *toward*, it becomes more likely that there is something we are running away *from*.

What is that something? It cannot be located only in the past (for example, fear of hunger, now largely overcome in developed countries, and certainly among elites), for if that something were not also in the present—still bothering us—then there would be no reason for technological development to continue at such a pace. No, the something we are trying to escape must continue to motivate us—perhaps now more than ever. Why would this acceleration be happening if it were motivated by something that is in the process of being solved? In that case one would expect technological development to begin slowing down, as the solution began to take effect. If we are indeed in the midst of some such solution, it is not obvious except perhaps to the most dogmatic (e.g., some neoliberal free-marketers). I conclude that our desire for progress, and our belief in progress, depend on our sense that something continues to be lacking right now.

What is it, then, that we lack? The obvious answer, the first that comes to mind, is that we are suffering—well, in some discomfort, at least—and progress is needed to make our lives more comfortable. Progress means such things as better food, transportation, health, and more free time to enjoy ourselves. We want more progress because we want more of those things, which we evidently still lack enough of. If we look at the report card on these examples, however, there are at least two important reasons to doubt that they can be the lack that continues to motivate our preoccupation with progress.

The first reason is that, although modern technologies have certainly improved our diets, and so forth, it is increasingly evident that each improvement has also resulted in unexpected and significant side effects, which have kept the progress from being what we expected and, perhaps, from being what we really want. In fact, one could argue that, had we been able to know ahead of time all the consequences of these “improvements,” we might have decided against some of them or (once our

#### WHY I AM NOT A PRINTING PRESS

Parked like 1950s cars,  
showroom glass  
between us,  
in carmine dusk  
or cobalt gleam finish,  
a long way from goose quills,  
sharpened  
with pen knife,  
wetted, dabbed  
in bovine horns, or ink blots.  
The man next to me points  
and says, in awe, That’s a *bad*  
pen. And I agree,  
imagining from my hand  
the *Yours truly*,  
the *Sincerely*,  
the *Fondly*. And so on  
across the mental pages,  
*Hopefully*,  
*Expectantly*,  
*On a cloudy Saturday, every-*  
*where I travel,*  
*you are not there,*  
*I am,*  
—Ailish Hopper

no possible endpoint for our technological development (except for “external” ecological constraints), brings us back to the questions raised above about our motivations. We might do better if we try to understand our preoccupation with progress as a reflex response to our dissatisfaction with the present. If we

thinking about progress escapes a linear model) might have decided to improve those aspects of our lives in different ways—might have, that is, if such technological improvements were ever democratically evaluated before being introduced.

For example, today we have much more food and a greater variety (although not in all ways, e.g., fewer types of apples readily available), safer in some ways (although not in other ways, due to genetic modification, preservatives, and other additives, etc.) but generally less tasty than before, a fact disguised by using more sugar, salt, and other flavor enhancers. This seems to be a consequence of the fact that food production and distribution have become industries whose products have had to adapt to industrial processes and commercial requirements. Our greatest food problem, however, seems to be an increasing number of eating disorders, among which I include the increasing reliance on fast food restaurants. All this suggests that modern food technologies have not actually improved our relationship with food and that something important was lost when the emphasis shifted from self-production (and sharing) to industrial technologies of mass production.

A similar argument could be made about our automobile culture. If we had understood the true price of cars' undeniable convenience—all the resources cars consume and the extraordinary ecological damage they cause, all the consequences of road construction, the effect on public spaces and community life, the international implications of our reliance on foreign oil, and so forth—might we have decided to focus instead on better public transport?

Regarding health care? That would seem to be a clear case of improvement due to modern technologies, and to some extent it is—but not as much as we tend to think. Ivan Illich (1977) and many others since him have pointed out that in developed countries one of the main causes of disease today is the health care system. Furthermore, emphasis on high-tech solutions has put the focus on high-cost cures rather than low-cost prevention. We are bombarded with “public service” media messages

blaming cancer and other immune system diseases on our lifestyles (too much tobacco, alcohol, fat, and sugar; not enough exercise, etc.), diverting our attention from social causes such as pollution. We have also come to take for granted a pill culture where the side effects of each pill need to be treated by other pills, and even the side effects of those pills may need to be treated. The cumulative effect of these pills and other interventions ameliorates the particular health problem being addressed but without necessarily promoting a better level of general health. Again, knowing what we do now, would we have done better to create a lower-tech medical culture emphasizing prevention—again, assuming that we ever had a choice?

Finally, have all our labor-saving modern technologies provided us with what they are supposed to provide us: a more leisurely life? Such a claim is difficult to defend, because there is so much evidence against it. A 1992 survey by the U.S. National Recreation and Park Association found that 38 percent of Americans report “always” feeling rushed, up from 22 percent in 1971. In *The Overworked American* (1992), Juliet Schor argued that Americans are working much longer hours, and more recently in the *Utne Reader* Joe Robinson (2000) has claimed that the United States has passed Japan as the most overworked nation in the industrialized world. He says that the husband and wife of an average U.S. household are now working an average of 500 more hours a year than they did in 1980. Lou Harris public opinion polls have shown a 37 percent decrease in Americans' reported leisure time over a twenty-year period (in Levine 1997, 107). The contrast with the life of “primitive peoples” is sharp:

Since time is one of several luxuries that indigenous peoples enjoy more readily than we do, communications are often characterized by deliberate slowness; people are not in a hurry. They don't believe in accomplishing more in less time [i.e., “efficiency”], because there is sufficient time to accomplish what needs to be done. They revel in the personal engagement that *not* rushing allows. When things have to get done, they get done by the group acting in concert. (Mander 1991, 66)

If there is a correlation between leisure time and the pace of technological developments, it seems to be inverse: the more “advanced” our technology, the less free time we seem to have. One reason is that all those machines that save time for us need to be tended and repaired by us; in addition to all the time many of us spend using computers, for example, we need to add the time spent upgrading, repairing, and replacing them, not to mention the time needed to earn the money to purchase them.

The mass media welcome and cheerily promote such new technologies, but if we add up the above examples, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that our technological “progress” has not been nearly as progressive as we would like. Most significant developments have cast a long, dark shadow, which however has become evident too late for us to remove or alter the technology involved—or so, at least, we have been led to believe.

There is another reason to doubt that the desire for comfort and convenience is what still motivates our fascination with new technologies. The crucial fact is that we have passed the point of diminishing returns: the additional convenience of each new gadget is not enough to justify the aggravated stress created by the speedup of our lives. To put it another way, if more comfort and convenience are what we lack and that is the problem that technological and economic progress is designed to solve, then they are no longer doing a very good job of it. If progress and happiness are defined in this way, progress today is not making us any happier. According to the 1999 *United Nations Human Development Report*, the percentage of Americans who considered themselves happy peaked in 1957, despite the fact that consumption per person has more than doubled since then. The main statistical indicator of progress used by governments, gross national product, is obviously defective, and increasingly perceived as such, because it measures only the monetary value of goods and services provided—which means it shoots way up if my wife and I have a contested divorce at the same time that I am diagnosed with a serious disease that

requires extensive and expensive treatment. Alternative indexes that also consider factors relating to social welfare and environmental quality show declines in the quality of life in the United States and Britain during the second half of the twentieth century: since the mid-1970s, according to the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW), and since 1950 according to the more recent Genuine Progress Index (GPI) (Jackson et. al. 1997; Cobb et. al. 1995).

Because such problems are more and more apparent, the obvious implication would seem to be that we should slow down to consider what they mean; instead, the world continues to speed up. If new gadgets don't make us happy, do we become preoccupied with them because we don't know what else to do with our lives? Unfortunately, there seems to be an inverse relationship between our Western fascination with technological progress and our paltry interest in understanding this fascination.

To sum up, it seems implausible that our fascination with technology and our preoccupation with progress are motivated primarily by the simple desire for more creature comforts. We need to look elsewhere if we want to figure out what it is we still lack (or think we lack). Could it be that we are indeed trying to escape something, but doing it in the wrong way, and that that is why it isn't working? This conclusion suggests what psychoanalysis calls repression, but here we can also benefit from a Buddhist perspective.

### The Lack of Self

How shall we understand *anatta*, "no-self," the strange Buddhist teaching that denies the self we take for granted in our everyday lives? Buddhism analyzes the so-called self into impersonal psychophysical phenomena (*skandhas*), whose interaction creates the illusion that consciousness is the attribute of a self. Elsewhere I have argued that the psychoanalytic understanding of repression can help us to understand our delusive sense of a separate self (Loy 1999). The Buddhist emphasis on *anatta* implies that our primary repression is not sexual wishes (as Freud believed), or even death fears (as many existential psychologists believe), but rather

*awareness of no-self*, that is, the uncomfortable realization that my sense-of-self is not something self-existing but a conditioned and ungrounded mental construct.

Because this awareness makes us so uncomfortable, we deny it by repressing it; but as Freud emphasized, repressions tend to return to awareness distorted into symptoms. In this case, intuition of my no-self returns as a sense of *lack*: the sense that "something is wrong with me." This sense of lack, which we tend to understand in different ways according to our particular situation (I'm not rich enough, famous enough, etc.), is a symptom because it is the distorted way we experience our ungroundedness—in more Buddhist terms, it is the way we try to evade our emptiness (*sunyata*).

Another way to describe this sense of lack is to say that we don't feel "real" enough. The solution to this is, of course, to become more real—or so it seems to us. If our ungroundedness makes us so uncomfortable, the solution is to become grounded, right? The problem with that solution, however, is that *anatta* means that it is the nature of my conditioned, "empty" sense-of-self to be ungrounded. Because the sense-of-self is an always-insecure construct, my efforts to real-ize myself become attempts to objectify myself in the world in some way, but that is something I can never do, any more than my hand can grasp itself or my eye can see itself.

In short, the empty sense-of-self has, as its inescapable shadow, a sense-of-lack, which it always tries to escape. What Freud called "the return of the repressed in the distorted form of a symptom" shows us how to link this basic yet hopeless project with the symbolic ways we try to make ourselves real in the world according to the possibilities available to us.

The problem with all such attempts is that no objectification can ever satisfy if it is not really an object we want. And when we do not understand what is actually motivating us—because what we think we want is only a symptom of something else (our desire to become real, which is essentially a spiritual yearning)—we end up compulsive. According to Nietzsche, a Christian

who follows the biblical admonition and plucks out his own eye does not kill his sensuality, for "it lives on in an uncanny vampire form and torments him in repulsive disguises" (1986, 331). But the opposite is also true: if today we think we have killed or otherwise escaped our spiritual drive we are deceiving ourselves, for that drive thrives in uncanny secular forms that obsess us because we do not understand what motivates them. *Is our obsession with technological progress one of them?* Does our lack also have such social and historical implications? Is there such a thing as *collective lack*?

Religion is the traditional way that societies have coped with the sense of lack (for example, Christian sin). Western European society was based on such a religious paradigm, until something new began to develop in the eleventh century: the possibility of progress toward an alternative solution. How did our preoccupation with technological development originate? How could a secular paradigm evolve out of a religious one? How did we come to pursue secular solutions to what is essentially a spiritual problem? The curious answer is that the "progress" solution was not originally secular.

In the period between 1050 and 1150, the European religious solution to lack began to shift from a "higher world" to this world, no longer looking up to the heavens but forward to what could appear on Earth in the future. The shift was gradual: in the beginning, the emphasis was on creating the spiritual and social conditions that could hasten the return of Christ and the new millennium he would inaugurate. Eventually, we became more confident about our ability to reshape society and the material conditions of our existence. This implied new understandings of temporality and technology—understandings now "common sense" and therefore oblivious to the spiritual motivations that originally developed them.

### A Time for Progress

Human understanding of time is always connected with our understanding of our lack and how it is to be resolved. This means that in traditional societies, including the premodern

West, the structure of time is fundamentally religious. In modern societies, time is merely an abstract and impersonal grid for coordinating the events that happen in this world (e.g., the 24-hour day and the 365-day year, where each hour and each day is like all the rest, an objectively measured unit of time that has no meaning in itself). In contrast, a traditional time scheme provides a sacred pattern that gives meaning to the events of this world; “the supernatural and the passage of time as represented by the yearly cycle were so closely linked that they were virtually indistinguishable” (Thompson 1996, 2).

According to this approach, when something is wrong in this world it is because of its disharmony with the supernatural world, and the solution is not “progress” but re-establishing harmony by renewing or re-enacting the proper time pattern: for example, sacrificing the proper way at the proper time. In contrast to our linear succession of cause-and-effect events, which we use to change the world, this associative temporality sees history and cosmology as inseparable. Time and what happens in time (or what *should* happen in time) are not distinguished. Rituals such as purification sacrifices are performed in accordance with cyclic natural phenomena because they are *needed* at those times—which is to say, such rituals do not occur *in* those time periods, but rather (if humans are doing what they should be doing) such rituals are *part of* those periods (Aveni 1995, 65).

According to Mircea Eliade, archaic societies lived in a “paradise of archetypes” because their time structure was based on periodic regeneration of the creation observed in nature (Aveni 1995, 65). This temporality presupposed that every re-creation repeats the initial act of genesis. By re-enacting the creation myth, participants relived the creation of order out of chaos, of meaning out of meaninglessness. Such events were never allowed to become “past” in the way that we understand the past, as historically superseded by the present. While we pursue progress by choosing to separate ourselves from past events, more traditional societies deny that duality by reliving the past. It is their responsibility to do so, to re-create the

creation that keeps the world going as it has been going. For them the past is not a weight to be overcome, nor is the future a set of novel possibilities that must be actualized. It is enough to repeat the old pattern.

The Maya, one of the most time-obsessed of all cultures, provide a good example. They did not measure time by the sun: time *is* the sun’s cycle. For them a day does not represent a god, as it does (or used to) for us (“Thursday” comes from Thor’s day, originally Jupiter’s day). For the Maya, each day *is* a god. Close attention to the demands of each day is necessary to preserve the parallel relationship between humans and the supernatural world. The past continues to repeat itself in the present because life’s events are carefully timed and regulated; only by weaving the two together can the order of the cosmos be maintained. In such a world view the future is of little interest, for the important events will continue to recur as long as the same balance of cosmic forces is maintained (Aveni 1995, 190ff). “By participating in the rituals, they helped the gods of nature to carry their burdens along their arduous course, for they believed firmly that the rituals served formally to close time’s cycles. Without their life’s work the universe could not function properly” (252). In such societies there is no need for progress and no place for it. So how did our fascination with progress arise?

Until about the eleventh century, Europe also understood time as a meaning-providing pattern to be re-enacted. “To understand our time is to chart the course of Western Judeo-Christendom” (Aveni 1995, 12). Our week has seven days because that repeats the pattern of creation at the beginning of the book of Genesis; Jews worship and rest on the Sabbath because on that day the Lord rested (early Christians changed that to the sun’s day because on that day Christ rose from the dead to become the light of the world). The yearly cycle of Catholic church commemorations still reveals its associative origins. In short, early medieval time largely retained the nonduality between cosmology and history—with one important difference. For traditional peoples such as the Maya, the end of time, which might

occur without their continual sacrifices to maintain the sun-deity on his course, would be the greatest possible catastrophe. For Christians, the second coming of Christ was a salvation to be wished for. That turned out to be a crucial difference.

Early Christians believed that the return of Christ was imminent. His failure to do so was explained in various ways, but through the medieval and early modern eras there were periodic irruptions of millenarianism. Apocalyptic millenarianism (which occurs periodically in many religions, not just Christianity) can be characterized as belief that the tension between the defiled world and the holy supernatural will be finally resolved in the (near) future when the transcendent manifests itself so completely that this world is purified and transformed. The crucial step toward modern time and our progress orientation was the notion of a future golden age not outside human temporality but within it, an idea adopted by Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), an influential Calabrian abbot and hermit who had visions of complex patterns that drew together all the different threads of revelation and history.

Joachim retained the traditional belief that events on Earth correspond to what is happening in another dimension, while also envisioning a perfected Christian utopia on Earth in the future. According to his exegesis, the Old Testament corresponded to the Age of the Father and the New Testament to that of the Son; the final Age of the Spirit, which he thought would arrive by about 1260, would be a supremely happy era during which a renewed Church would regulate all aspects of life. “Without necessarily meaning to, he had made the crucial connection between apocalyptic change and political reconstruction. From the thirteenth century onwards, the two could never be entirely separated” (Thompson 1996, 128). The trajectory that would culminate in our cherished faith in progress was set, having grown out of

the Christian belief that all things are made expressly for the end they fulfil. . . . faith in the Second Coming pulls the true believer forward through the good life toward the ultimate judgment that gives

reason to it all. In modern times, this notion of advancement along a time line still prevails, except that technology has replaced religion as the force that propels events to succeed one another; nonetheless, the doctrine remains teleological. (128)

Far from being rational alternatives to religious apocalypticism, “many of the ideas we consider to be the very opposite of ‘medieval,’ such as faith in progress and the promise of utopia, have roots in the religious beliefs of the middle ages—and End-time beliefs at that” (57).

### The Spiritual Roots of Technology

If technology has replaced religion for many of us, that may be because our attitude toward technology has similar religious roots—and still retains them. David Noble’s *The Religion of Technology* (1998) shows that our contemporary fascination with modern technology is rooted in religious myth and the quest for spiritual salvation. “Although today’s technologists, in their sober pursuit of utility, power and profit, seem to set society’s standard for rationality, they are driven also by distant dreams, spiritual yearnings for supernatural redemption. . . . their true inspiration lies . . . in an enduring, other-worldly quest for transcendence and salvation” (3). Those who fantasize about “downloading their minds” into megagigabyte hard drives may think of themselves as antireligious rationalists, but religious eschatology can assume uncanny disguises. We may have forgotten what originally motivated us, but that does not mean we have escaped it.

In the medieval period, “for reasons that remain obscure” (Noble 1998, 12), significant changes began to occur in the Christian attitude toward technology. Medieval society believed that part of its fallenness was that it had lost knowledge of the ancient arts and sciences which its predecessors had perfected. What was new was the belief that those mechanical arts could and should be resurrected—initially, not so much to improve our worldly condition as to help create the temporal conditions that would hasten the return of Christ. “Over time, technology came to be identified more closely with both lost perfection and the possibility of

renewed perfection, and the advance of the arts took on a new significance, not only as evidence of grace, but as a means of preparation for, and a sure sign of, imminent salvation.” The influential Augustinian monk Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141) emphasized that “the work of restoration included the repair of man’s physical life,” which had been damaged by sin and forfeited with the Fall (12, 19–20).

An elite revitalization and reinterpretation of early Christian belief . . . situated the process of recovery in the context of human history and redefined it as an active and conscious pursuit rather than a merely passive and blind expectation. . . . The recovery of mankind’s divine likeness, the transcendent trajectory of Christianity, thus now became at the same time an immanent historical project. . . . Technology now became at the same time eschatology. (22)

Noble describes Joachim’s interpretation of the Book of Revelation as the “most influential prophetic system known to Europe until Marxism” (1998, 24). It “ignited the greatest spiritual revolution of the Middle Ages” by revealing the millenarian meaning of history, God’s plan for humanity. All wise men, wrote Roger Bacon, believe that the time of the Antichrist is nigh, and he urged his fellow churchmen to study Joachim’s prophecies in order to be forewarned about the final events of history.

Later, even Francis Bacon, the prophet of modern science, sought “a return to the state of Adam before the Fall, a state of pure and sinless contact with nature and knowledge of her powers . . . a progress back towards Adam” (Francis Yates, in Noble 1998, 50). Both Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton were fervent millenarians, and the latter spent much of his time on the interpretation of biblical prophecy. For them, as for many other early scientists, the scientific quest was a devout effort to come closer to their Creator by discovering his “signature” in the natural world (64). “Armed with such foreknowledge, which included an anticipation of their own appointed role, the elect needed no longer to just passively await the millennium; they could now actively work to bring it about” (24–25). We are still working to do that, but in the meantime we have forgotten exactly what it is we

are supposed to be bringing about. Is that why our accelerating progress can have no endpoint?

We have forgotten what we are doing because our understanding of our lack has been displaced, and therefore our approach to resolving it. Instead of being the crux of creation and history, where the traditional Christian story placed it, our lack has been marginalized by our preoccupation with new technological powers and possibilities. We no longer depend upon the structure of the cosmos for our salvation, but try to achieve it by ourselves. In place of the traditional nonduality between cosmos and history—which provides us with an intricate spiritual obstacle course to be followed according to fixed rules—we began to live in a open-ended universe where we had to set up the goals and decide which way to go. We decided to run into the future and called the new game progress.

### Endgame?

Is that game just about over? The attraction of the future is collapsing, which means our collective sense of lack is beginning to disinvest from the economic and technological projects whereby it hoped to become real. No longer having faith in any spiritual solution, however, we remain trapped in the future because that provides the only way we can think of to address our sense of lack. We “progress” faster and faster because we do not know what else to do, what other game to play. The more we suspect that we are headed nowhere, the faster we need to run. The technological and economic implications of the ecological crisis have been ignored or repressed over the last decade, at least in the United States, but that cannot continue indefinitely. Fewer and fewer people still believe that technology will solve the world’s problems and lead to a better life; the collective lack-project of technological development is beginning to be challenged by an increasing number of thoughtful people. For those who control the dominant institutions of government and corporations, however, the final stage of “progress” has become a number game of economic growth as measured by gross national product.

The other cultural alternative is nihilism, which takes many different forms and is becoming widespread. It amounts to abandoning all hope of any possible solution to our lack. Since this drains life of any meaning, the only thing to do is enjoy ourselves while we can.

What other paradigms for resolving lack are possible? Since I have explained the problem from a Buddhist perspective, I conclude by mentioning the Buddhist solution, which involves the personal effort to transform ourselves—or rather, to let ourselves be transformed, which is what happens, for example, when we meditate. The goal of Buddhist practice is to transform the three poisons of greed, ill will, and delusion into generosity, compassion, and wisdom. The third transformation involves not gaining something but letting go of something—not just of particular thoughts and feelings but, most fundamentally, of our sense-of-self.

The Buddhist denial of a substantial self (*anatta*) opens up the possibility of a this-worldly transcendence of self, in realizing the nondual interdependence of a no-longer-alienated subject with a no-longer-objectified world. Buddhist awakening occurs when I realize that I am not other than that world. One way to express this is that I am what the world is doing right here, right now. This liberation frees me from the self-preoccupation of always trying to ground myself. If “I” am not inside “my” body, looking out at the world outside, then “I” do not need to secure

myself. Once “I” have realized this by letting go of myself, there is nothing that needs to be made “real,” and nothing to lose.

So the final irony of my struggle to ground myself—to make myself feel real by filling up my sense of lack—is that it cannot succeed because I am already grounded in the totality. I am groundless and ungroundable insofar as delusively feeling myself to be separate from the world; but I have always been fully grounded insofar as I am actually nondual with the world. It turns out that my lack is a lack only as long as I dread it and attempt to fill it up. When I cease doing that, my lack transforms into the source of my creative energy, which wells up from a fathomless source. According to Buddhism, such awakening is spontaneously accompanied by compassion for all beings, now perceived as not other than myself.

That such a liberation might become widespread in the foreseeable future is too much to hope for, but if this possibility were to become socially acknowledged, and more widely appreciated and encouraged, the consequences would undoubtedly be immense. Whether or not even that is a collective possibility for humanity at this point in our cultural development is another question—although the cusp of a new millennium encourages such millenarian speculations. If our need is any indication, it is time for a radical transformation.

No people can live without faith in the ultimate victory of something.

—Rosenstock-Huussy

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