

The Price of Progress: How Liberalism and Technology Destroyed Politics and Value

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We live in an age of great unease and transition. Technology plays an increasingly pervasive role in our lives while discontent for the status quo continues to grow. The global liberal order is under threat from right-wing demagoguery, and people are losing faith in political institutions. Suddenly, we seem to be on the cusp of disaster, but this has been a long time in the making. For decades, if not centuries, the universalization of liberal values and the incessant march of technological progress have been eroding the values that unite politics and communities. Michael Sandel, David Runciman, and George Grant give us insights into these phenomena. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize their positions and demonstrate that the universalizing forces of liberalism and industrialization have created a world devoid of value in which we are increasingly disenchanted with politics and dominated by technology.

In his critique of liberalism, Sandel argues that liberalism, markets, and meritocracy have created conditions that render most people feeling left behind and forgotten. The rise of right-wing demagoguery is a reaction against the shortcomings of global liberalism. Liberalism has become too white-collar, abandoned the working class, and lost its ability to moderate and inspire anything but rage and disillusionment.¹ Liberal policies make the working class feel betrayed and devalued by society at large. For example, free trade agreements may result in cheaper goods, but they also may result in job losses. It seems as though society prioritizes the access to mass-produced, cheap goods over providing them with a livelihood.² This sentiment results in discontent with the liberal order and often manifests itself in many violent and ugly forms, such as xenophobia, islamophobia, and “taking back our country”³ rhetoric. The disillusionment with liberal globalization creates a discontented populace looking for someone to blame. This populace is consequently susceptible to demagogues who promise to fix the world but only perpetuate the systems that created these problems in the first place.

Moreover, Sandel asserts that liberal meritocracy

corrodes societal bonds. Meritocracy holds that offices and positions should be awarded on the basis of merit—the most capable should rule. However, this creates tensions between classes.⁴ Those on top believe themselves to be there justly, since they have excelled in a system that supposedly does not allow the incompetent to succeed. Conversely, this also implies that those at the bottom deserve their circumstances. The poor, marginalized, and oppressed are there because they are not hard workers and therefore do not merit success.

Meritocracy, as a cultural value, becomes harmful when it is no longer in alignment with reality. Many hard-working people who carved out a decent middle-class existence now find themselves facing unemployment, stagnant wages, and fewer opportunities. Dual-income households struggle to provide the same standard of living provided by a single breadwinner forty years ago, to say nothing of the struggles faced by single-income households. They work themselves to the bone, but this does little to improve their socioeconomic position. Clearly, this dynamic is problematic for those who feel that they do not deserve to be at the bottom. From their perspective, it is the system that has failed them, not the reverse. The most successful resist changes to the system because they believe that those seeking change are simply coveting what they do not deserve. These class antagonisms do not predispose a society towards harmony.

Lastly, Sandel posits that liberalism’s cold rationale leaves it unequipped to deal with such emotional backlashes. Liberal tolerance is predicated on the belief that it is better to allow each person to decide their own interpretation of the good life. It deems morality to be a private matter in order to prevent a majority from imposing its values on a minority.⁵ This is what Sandel calls the “liberal public good”: the government must be neutral towards competing conceptions of the good, allowing the free market of ideas to determine the governing ethics of society.⁶ In other words, liberal society abstains from adjudication and hopes that people are

able to come to an agreement on their own. Since the rights upheld in liberalism are not rooted in any one particular conception of the good, they become vulnerable when segments of society have conflicting interests. This conception of liberalism as a purely rational order leaves its proponents unequipped to comprehend and address emotional reactions to its adverse effects. These reactions often arise from those who feel like the system is not working in their favour. The rational liberal, who sees liberalism as a consistent, rational system, struggles to understand the arguments levied against it.

For his part, Runciman focuses on the political effects of technology. He asserts that, across the globe, technology has supplanted politics by virtue of its fast-moving nature. In the developing world, technology provides the services the government cannot. For example, even in areas where the government fails to maintain roads and libraries, mobile phones may allow individuals to access the internet and, therefore, a wealth of information. Technology gives people in the developing world a means of grassroots organization and communication, free from the interference of corrupt governments. Through the internet, people can conduct business without state impositions.⁷ In the developed world, technology is viewed as fast and dynamic compared to the slow, cumbersome state. Technology is seen as the means of progress, the fountain of innovation that advances the human species. Comparatively, the public sector is no longer seen as capable of innovations comparable to those of twenty-first century internet platforms such as YouTube and Wikipedia.⁸ In sum, people all over the world are beginning to look to technology to answer political questions and perform services once thought to be in the government's domain.

Furthermore, technology's rapid evolution results in a contempt for politics. In the developing world, technology provides many services that a failed state cannot, breeding contempt (although citizens of many post-colonial countries and failed states have a plethora of reasons for contempt beyond technology). The American political system is explicitly designed to be slow and conservative, while the technology corporations of Silicon Valley are beholden to no one except their shareholders. As a result, Silicon Valley often views government as an impediment to progress, a constraint that holds back the advancement of civilization. Ironically, the very technologies upon which Silicon Valley has built its success are the direct product of government innovation and investment—without the American military in the '50s and '60s, the internet would not exist.⁹ Yet, many in the developed world, especially those in Silicon Valley, believe that private technology—rather than the public sector—is the way of the future. Silicon Valley technocrats are now bankrolling and lobbying governments around the world to make their policies more amenable to technological innovation.¹⁰ In this sense, technology

is literally taking over politics.

Grant touches on many of the same themes as Runciman, arguing that conservatism is incompatible with change and progress. Generally speaking, conservatism seeks to preserve the character and idiosyncrasies of a given political community. This might mean upholding and reinforcing traditional social relations and ways of life that are unique to a given people or culture. Progress, understood as technological advancement through industrialization, is incompatible with conservatism. This is because progress demands the adoption of the newest and most efficient methods to execute systems and ideas. The dedication to the most effective process results in different people doing things the same way. For example, the best way to produce steel nails is not going to differ based on the geographic location of the manufacturing plant. This phenomenon results in the destruction of local traditions and lifestyles because it is unlikely that industrial practices will account for localized practices.¹¹

Grant uses the example of education reform in 20th century Québec to illustrate his point: “French Canadians must modernise their educational system if they are to have more than a peon's place in their own industrialisation. Yet to modernize their education is to renounce their particularity. At the heart of modern liberal education lies the desire to homogenise the world.”¹² In other words, education is the primary means of perpetuating culture to the next generation, and an industrial society has different educational needs than a society organized along agrarian lines. Accordingly, Grant explains that educational reform was necessary for the Québécois to exert some control over the industrialization of their society. However, adopting an industrial education means moulding one's traditional curriculum to the industrial curricula of other nations. In this case, Québécois were faced with what Grant called “renouncing their particularity.” As societies industrialize and adopt industrial education, they become more homogenous. Thus, progress is incompatible with conservatism.

In addition, Grant provides an interpretation of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche argues that modernity is characterized by the secularization of Christian ethics and values. Since Nietzsche holds a highly critical position vis-à-vis Christianity, if modernity is merely secularized Christianity, it follows that Nietzsche also holds modernity with a great deal of contempt. He writes, “now that Christianity has been secularised, the transcendence of progress has been substituted for the transcendence of God.”¹³ By the “transcendence of God,” he means the penetration of Christianity into all facets of life, characterized by the dominance of the Christian Church in the centuries following the fall of the western half of the Roman Empire. Thus, the “transcendence of progress” is the permeation of the doctrine of progress. With this cult of progress,

two kinds of people emerge in modernity: the nihilists and the last men. Nietzsche claims:

“The last men are those who have inherited the ideas of happiness and equality from the doctrine of progress. But because this happiness is to be realised by all men, the conception of its content has to be shrunk to fit what can be realised by all. The sights for human fulfilment have to be lowered.”¹⁴

The happiness and existence of the last men are basic and hollow because a universal happiness can only include what is universal. There is nothing for the individual except for happiness and values that must be shared by all. The nihilists, on the other hand, fail to find meaning in a post-Christian world and thus live a joyless and violent existence as they “seek to fill the void by willing for willing’s sake.”¹⁵ Because they have not bought into progress and cannot find meaning in the sterile rationality of modernity, they will believe in whatever makes them feel better. Nietzsche’s view of modernity, as read by Grant, is bleak.

At first blush, it appears that each of these authors is making a different argument. Sandel’s argument is entirely centred on liberalism. He claims that the problems we see today are the result of liberalism’s inability to deal with the antagonistic social relations it creates. He does not discuss technology, nor the role it plays in the problems of the present day. Grant, on the other hand, does discuss both technology and liberalism, but not in the same context as Sandel or Runciman. Grant wrote *Lament for a Nation* in the early 1960s, when computing was still in its infancy. He understands liberalism as the Keynesian-Fordist welfare state as opposed to neoliberal finance capitalism. In his lifetime, technology was limited to manufacturing and industrialization rather than digital information technologies. Moreover, Grant’s work draws on Nietzsche, who wrote in the late 19th century—a context which is markedly different from ours, and even Grant’s. Thus, it is not immediately clear how each of their arguments can be synthesized.

Runciman and Sandel may also appear to be at odds. Runciman is the only theorist under consideration who explicitly argues that technology supplants politics. He discusses the nature of technology and its relations with, and impacts on, political systems. He attributes the decline of politics to the contempt generated by technology’s exponentially rapid pace. The rate at which technology evolves and constantly becomes better equipped to perform an ever-increasing list of tasks has left many feeling that politics is stale and contrary to progress. In contrast, Sandel’s position is that the decline in politics and the rise of right-wing demagoguery results from the faults of liberal social and political relations. To Sandel, what we are seeing today is the exhaustion of the liberal system, which has created problems that it is funda-

mentally incapable of addressing. On the surface, it can appear that Sandel and Runciman are opposed to each other: one blames technology, while the other blames politics.

Despite their differences, it is possible to create a narrative using each of their arguments. Through Grant, we can bind their views into a relatively cohesive position on technology. Grant talks about industrialization as if it is a kind of co-process of liberalization. The two are deeply connected phenomena that often develop alongside one another. Through industrialization, which we can imagine as a force equivalent to the “Big Tech” of Silicon Valley, the universalization of production processes is achieved. Meanwhile, the universalization of politics is achieved through liberalization. Thus, by conceiving of technology and politics as two forces of universalization, we can tie together Runciman’s and Sandel’s ideas.

Given that liberals conceive of their ideology as universal, it is easy to see how Sandel’s argument fits into this dynamic. Runciman’s position is not as clear. However, if we define technology as simply the means or process by which a task is performed, then industrialization is the universalization of new ways of doing things. Thus, the ever-changing technology Runciman describes is the sum of the ever-improving ways of doing things, each method being more effective and efficient than the last. The constant adoption of new technologies, updated in ever-shortening intervals, results in the destruction of traditional methods and cultures. Even if a country manages to develop its own, more efficient industrial method of action, the universalization thereof makes it hollow to its parent culture. Eventually, a new method is inevitably developed and replaces it. Those who buy into this doctrine of progress see government as a constraint and cannot understand why their innovations are limited by public policy. Those who do not buy into it are the nihilists. The traditional values and ways of life they once found meaningful have been destroyed by the unstoppable tides of modernity. Liberal rationality strips traditional values of meaning, while industrialization removes all idiosyncrasies from a society. As a result, people feel betrayed and lash out violently in attempts to “take back their country.”

We can even read Grant’s understanding of Nietzsche’s dichotomy of the last men and nihilists into Sandel’s and Runciman’s. We can imagine Sandel’s liberal meritocratic establishment and Runciman’s Silicon Valley technocrats as Nietzsche’s last men. These are the people who believe in the transcendence of progress, looking to advance in all possible ways. They are the inheritors of the doctrine of progress who have bought into liberal technological progress while espousing universal values. These values, however, by virtue of being universalized, are devoid of any localized meaning. Local, particular values have more immediate and personal

significance to their progenitors than values intended to be adoptable by all human beings. In contrast, we can imagine the right-wing reaction against liberal internationalism as fitting with Nietzsche's nihilists. Conservatism is generally antagonistic to liberalism, and many proponents of the former view have seen their values hollowed out by universal liberal values. Instead of buying into the liberal order, conservatives have been left behind and have become resentful of those who the international system benefits. As the nihilists cannot find meaningful value in the world of liberal internationalism, they begin "willing for the sake of willing," conjuring myths of white supremacy, patriarchy, and fascism in a desperate attempt to fill the void of value created by

progress.

All in all, we can see how the interacting forces of technology and liberalism have supplanted politics. Their powers of universalization have stripped much of society of its traditional beliefs and values and replaced them with a cult of progress. This cult removes the particularities of a given nation while creating contempt for both the classes of ruling and ruled. People cannot find value in the world, only newer and better ways of doing the same things, with each iteration further eroding the bonds between people and their trust in government.

Notes

1. Michael Sandel, "Right-Wing Populism Is Rising as Progressive Politics Fails – Is It Too Late to Save Democracy?" *New Statesman*, 21 May 2018, <https://www.newstatesman.com/2018/05/right-wing-populism-rising-progressive-politics-fails-it-too-late-save-democracy>.
2. Sandel, "Right-Wing Populism Is Rising as Progressive Politics Fails."
3. Sandel.
4. Sandel.
5. Sandel.
6. Sandel.
7. David Runciman, "Politics or Technology – Which Will Save the World?" *The Guardian*, 23 May 2014, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/23/politics-technology-save-world-david-runciman>.
8. Runciman, "Politics or Technology."
9. Runciman.
10. Runciman.
11. George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1965), 156.
12. Grant, *Lament for a Nation*, 159.
13. George Grant, "Teaching What Nietzsche Taught," in *Canadian Political Thought*, ed. H. D. Forbes (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1985), 439.
14. Grant, "Teaching What Nietzsche Taught," 434.
15. Grant, 439.