

## Caroline Ashcroft: Catastrophic Technology in Cold War Political Thought

Review: Caroline Ashcroft: *Catastrophic Technology in Cold War Political Thought*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 264 pp., £95.00 (hardback) / £24.99 (paperback) / £24.99 (ebook).

Caroline Ashcroft's *Catastrophic Technology in Cold War Political Thought* is an exciting read about the "critical, even catastrophic, idea of technology" (p.1) that emerged in mid-twentieth-century social and political theories. This idea of technology was, as Ashcroft (p.1) points out, "entangled with the apocalyptic fears engendered by two all-consuming world wars and the looming nuclear threat". Ashcroft analyses the theories of an array of relevant thinkers, among them Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Hans Jonas, and Günther Anders, the Frankfurt School theorists Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, French theologian and sociologist Jacques Ellul and the American historian and sociologist Lewis Mumford. These thinkers developed diverse theories and often argued against each other, but they had, as Ashcroft's book portrays, one thing in common: they shared the view that modern technology is inherently dangerous and destructive to human societies.

Most political theorists today see technology as having tremendous humanitarian potential while carrying enormous destructive risks. Although technology is considered to be a kernel root of climate change, to have contributed to the spread of populism and discrimination, and to have enabled wars and political conflicts with horrifying numbers of deaths and injuries, technology, on the flipside, has also contributed to significant medical advancements, improved infrastructure critical to food security, and enabled the spread of information from marginalised and suppressed groups. Yet this balanced view on technology, Ashcroft's book illuminates, is not shared by Cold War theorists. As Ashcroft has pointedly coined it, they think of modern technology as inherently "catastrophic technology".

Of course, technology itself does not determine action. Ashcroft's theorists take this as a given. Nevertheless, they think that modernity has developed a particular type of technological practice that has become intertwined with human action in inherently problematic, even catastrophic, ways. As Ashcroft points out, this is not necessarily seen as a picture in which machines take control over humans, but rather as an "organisational pattern that merges with human activity across every sphere of human existence, that becomes continuous and contiguous with human action" (p. 3). The Cold War political and social theorists Ashcroft explores exclude all positive influences of technology on politics. The book is called "Catastrophic Technology" because Ashcroft's thinkers depict the very nature of modern technology as "inexorably destructive of the political and social structures of human life" (p. 1). In short: Technology in modernity has become a threat to the existence of the very societies it emerged from, and even to human life itself.

Ashcroft is an established Arendt scholar and, not surprisingly, Hannah Arendt's theory of technology and its political dimension features heavily in the book. There are at least two reasons why *Catastrophic Technology* is highly interesting for Arendt scholarship. Firstly, Arendt's theory of modern technology is discussed as one prominent voice within the history of the idea of catastrophic technology. Thus, owing to the fact that Ashcroft's book emphasises the commonality of this idea across a range of Cold War political theories, Arendt's theory of technology is contextualized in a setting of theories with which she did not concur on many other levels. Ashcroft pays careful attention to the exchanges between the authors she explores, and the reader thus gains a multifaceted and nuanced insight into the way in which the idea of catastrophic technology takes hold in Arendt's theory specifically, in relation to and in contrast with the way it takes hold in other authors.

The second reason Ashcroft's book is a must-read for Arendt scholars is that it highlights the radicality of Arendt's critique of technology. Unlike most other aspects of Arendt's political thought, her views on modern technology are still widely understudied. This is due to the fact that Arendt's apocalyptic and catastrophic perspective on technology is, by virtue of the exclusion of almost any positive impact, even potential, of technology, arguably an outdated view. Climate activists like Thunberg to pacifists like Medea Benjamin emphasise the destructive *use* of technology by human societies, rather than the inherently destructive nature of modern technology. They thus also think that the damaging effects of modern technology could be averted through political and societal decisions. Unlike most Arendtian themes that appear to become ever more up-to-date, such as her theories of migration, statelessness, and political participation, Arendt's radical criticism of the nature of modern technology is easily associated with ostracized doomsday theories. As Ashcroft points out, however, we must not share her theorists' ultimately apocalyptic views on modern technology in order to learn from them about the interwoven nature of technology and politics in modernity. Even if we see positive political potential for technology, we may benefit from Arendt's assessment of the problematic interwovenness of technology and politics. In times of technological vote manipulation, technologically spread and validated fake-news, and discriminating big-data-based policies, we may be well-advised to study Arendt's assessment of the problematic influence of technology on political societies. Let us turn to two examples to illustrate this.

As Ashcroft points out, Arendt thinks that through modern media the "distinction between public and private has been degraded, merged into the 'social' sphere, where the public sphere is increasingly overwhelmed by a private sphere that has exceeded its traditional boundaries" (p. 146). In times when presidents use their private social media platforms for political propaganda and call their political counterparts playground names or "good friends", the problematic nature of a merging of the private and the political is certainly a profound observation. Arendt's message is, as Ashcroft points out, that the medium of communication is united with the message itself. As highly problematized in today's politics, in particular through social media, the private sphere is increasingly invaded by the public sphere with often damaging effects. Arendt simultaneously draws attention to the problem in the reverse: the public sphere is invaded by the private sphere,

as is evident from reality shows or in political campaigns that are charged with private portrayals and relationships.

Another topic central to Ashcroft's book is the relationship between modern technology, on the one hand, and totalitarianism, violence, and destruction, on the other. As Ashcroft points out, Arendt, along with other theorists of catastrophic technology, held that the problem of modern warfare technology is not limited to its use. Rather, the very existence of weaponry of mass destruction is destructive and inherently totalitarian. Ashcroft highlights that Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, argues that the modern technological society is "the space in which we are now at greatest threat *from* totalitarian trends" (p. 98). This is not only because of the obvious threat of a technology that is deliberately destructive, but also through the creation of waste, environmental destruction, and the potential for all-consuming control. In this context, Ashcroft's (p. 99) summary of her theorists' view on the intrinsic relation between modern technology and totalitarian destruction is:

In short, technology's uniquely destructive capacity is the capacity to totally destroy, a distinction encapsulated by the power of the atom and later hydrogen bomb, but reaching far beyond that emblematic Cold War weapon. Modern technology's even more terrible quality is the apparent inevitability of this destructive potential.

As noted earlier, we may not share this apocalyptic view, yet, with Arendt, we recognize that technology's destructive power is not limited to an intentionally destructive decision. Instead, technological development is intrinsically linked to societal threats, including environmental damage, loss of human habitat and resources, and environmental catastrophes. Furthermore, the very existence of weapons of greater, more efficient, and mass destruction extends its destructive power to peace-time societies, insofar as it threatens civil protest, as recently seen in Iran, and insofar as it spreads lasting fear in humans, as seen in nuclear threats by countries.

These two examples highlight that Ashcroft's history of the idea of catastrophic technology in Cold War Political thought is a highly valuable resource for today's political theory. While we can learn a lot about Arendt's critique of modern technology and its political dimension in the book, Ashcroft focuses on the idea of catastrophic technology across an entire era of political thought. By highlighting the contemporary relevance of Arendt's theory of technology, the book calls for further in-depth studies of Arendt's insights into the problematic entanglement of modern technology and politics.

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