

After Technopoly

Alan Jacobs

What Neil Postman called “technopoly” may be described as the universal and virtually inescapable rule of our everyday lives by those who make and deploy technology, especially, in this moment, the instruments of digital communication. It is difficult for us to grasp what it’s like to live under technopoly, or how to endure or escape or resist the regime. These questions may best be approached by drawing on a handful of concepts meant to describe a slightly earlier stage of our common culture.

First, following on my earlier essay in these pages, “Wokeness and Myth on Campus” (Summer/Fall 2017), I want to turn again to a distinction by the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski between the “technological core” of culture and the “mythical core”—a distinction he believed is essential to understanding many cultural developments.

“Technology” for Kołakowski is something broader than we usually mean by it. It describes a stance toward the world in which we view things around us as objects to be manipulated, or as instruments for manipulating our environment and ourselves. This is not necessarily meant in a negative sense; some things ought to be instruments—the spoon I use to stir my soup—and some things need to be manipulated—the soup in need of stirring. Besides tools, the technological core of culture includes also the sciences and most philosophy, as those too are governed by instrumental, analytical forms of reasoning by which we seek some measure of control.

By contrast, the mythical core of culture is that aspect of experience that is not subject to manipulation, because it is prior to our instrumental reasoning about our environment. Throughout human civilization, says Kołakowski, people have participated in myth—they may call it “illumination” or “awakening” or something else—as a way of connecting with “nonempirical unconditioned reality.” It is something we enter into with our full being, and all attempts to describe the experience in terms of desire, will, understanding, or literal meaning are ways of trying to force the mythological core into the technological core by analyzing and rationalizing myth and pressing it into a logical order. This is why the two

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cores are always in conflict, and it helps to explain why rational argument is often a fruitless response to people acting from the mythical core.

Let's add to this distinction a different but closely related one by the English political philosopher Michael Oakeshott. In his 1948 essay "The Tower of Babel" (collected in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*), Oakeshott outlines two general forms of the moral life. In one, he says, "The moral life is *a habit of affection and behaviour,*" of "*conduct.*" He then asks the question, "From what sort of education will this first form of the moral life spring?" He answers that "we acquire habits of conduct in the same way as we acquire our native language"—that is, "not by constructing a way of living upon rules or precepts and learned by heart and subsequently practiced, but by living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner." To this form of moral life he contrasts another, in which "activity is determined, not by a habit of behaviour, but by *the reflective application of a moral criterion.*"

This is a form of the moral life in which a special value is attributed to self-consciousness, individual or social; not only is the rule or the ideal the product of reflective thought, but the application of the rule or the ideal to the situation is also a reflective activity.

Drawing on both Oakeshott and Kołakowski, I may summarize the argument of this essay thus: Technopoly is a system that *arises* within a society that views moral life as an application of rules but that *produces* people who practice moral life by habits of affection, not by rules. (Think of Silicon Valley social engineers who have created and capitalized upon Twitter outrage mobs.) Put another way, technopoly arises from the technological core of society but produces people who are driven and formed by the mythical core.

Technopoly's development of people who function mythically is, for now, in the interest of technopoly. But it also brings into view how myth may be shaping our common future after technopoly.

Not by Rules

Campus protest today reveals the dynamic of technopoly. As I argued in "Wokeness and Myth on Campus," we see the failure to understand the distinction between the two modes of action on display in public discussions about campus protest. Woke culture is not characterized by the reflective application of any moral criterion—in fact, reflection on the governing criteria, the governing myths, is precisely what the protests

of the woke are meant to repudiate. Rather, woke culture is driven by certain habits of affection and behavior. The affective dimension demands hatred of the oppressor; the behavioral dimension demands call-outs and protests.

University students whose conduct is generated by these habits, arising from the mythical core, will call out microaggressions and protest hate speech; but they will do so not by virtue of having analyzed a situation and concluded that call-outs and protests are the most effective means of achieving certain political ends, but rather because they are (to return to Oakeshott) “living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner.” This is why attempts to demonstrate that call-outs and protests are ineffective almost always fall on deaf ears. These critiques assume that the protesters can be moved by appeals to models of the social order that arise from the technological core of civilization. And the preeminent form of social order that is in this distinctive sense “technological” is the form that we call *liberalism*.

One of the classic critiques made against the liberal social order is that it is philosophically thin, characterized by an inadequate, narrow, limited account of human being and human flourishing. It effectively waives essential (we may say mythical) questions about what the human animal is and replaces those questions with a commitment to certain fixed *procedures* applied to all, such as procedures intended to ensure fair treatment or equal representation. These procedures, philosophical liberals believe, are the best preservers of peace in a highly plural society such as ours. But such proceduralism arises from the technological core of culture, which is why appeals to fairness and the like miss the mythological orientation of student protests.

As an example of a failed critique of campus protest, take a recent argument by Richard Prystowsky of Marion Technical College. Writing on the website for Heterodox Academy, an organization dedicated to promoting “viewpoint diversity” in the American university, Prystowsky sought to persuade student protesters and “no-platformers” that their preferred strategies are ineffective:

If [students] are led to think that it is appropriate for them to shout down speakers whose views they dislike or that they find offensive, then, to act with intellectual integrity and in good faith, students would have to support people shouting *them* down when they express views that others find distasteful or offensive.

But protesters who shout down others without acknowledging that they

too could be shouted down can be said to act without “intellectual integrity” and “good faith” only under the assumption that we are living under proceduralism, that arguments can appeal to procedures that mandate equal treatment. Student protesters do not share those assumptions. For them, what matters is that their positions are correct and the positions of those they are shouting down are wrong. And, again, they know that their positions are correct not by virtue of “the reflective application of a moral criterion” but by having cultivated certain habits and dispositions in the company of like-minded others.

Similarly, it is common to hear political pundits contend that Republicans act in bad faith when they cheerfully allow President Trump to do precisely the same things for which they fiercely denounced President Obama, or that Democrats lack intellectual integrity when they protest behavior by Trump that they warmly embraced in Obama. These arguments also appeal to proceduralist norms in conditions where such norms simply have no force. Few members of our political class are willing to share a common set of rules and norms with those they are convinced will ruin the country if they get a chance.

Proceduralism—with its accompanying criteria of fairness, balance, equal treatment—is a political strategy that arises from the technological core of our civilization. It seeks to manipulate discourse in such a way as to preserve itself. It is for that very reason alien to any mind shaped fundamentally by the mythical core, whose convictions arise from a reality that we perceive by living among certain persons and practicing certain forms of conduct. Those being shaped by a mythical core respond to pleas for procedural fairness by crying, “What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness?” Even if some elaborate verbal gymnastics may be performed by way of post-hoc rationalization, this is ultimately why it’s okay to punch (anyone you deem) a Nazi.

The Swarms and the Rationalists

Campus protesters are just a small subset of people who have been deeply habituated to certain forms of conduct and who define themselves by those forms. Protesters are a subset of people who *swarm*, to use a concept from Polish-born sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (2008). Bauman argues that swarms are a defining feature of modern “liquid” society—his label for our stage of modernity, which is characterized by fluid social orders:

In a liquid-modern society, *swarms* tend to replace *groups*, with their leaders, hierarchies, and pecking orders....Swarms need not be burdened by the group's tools of survival: they assemble, disperse, and come together again from one occasion to another, each time guided by different, invariably shifting relevancies, and attracted by changing and moving targets....A swarm has no top, no center; it is solely the direction of its current flight that casts some of the self-propelled swarm units into the position of "leaders" to be followed for the duration of a particular flight or a part of it, though hardly longer.

Swarming behavior is not rule-governed, but can rather be thought of as *emergent* behavior. Beehives and ant colonies are capable of remarkably complex achievements, but not because bees and ants internalize and enact complex instructions from above, and not because the complexity is designed; rather, they follow a few very simple rules, from which complexity emerges. In human societies, "leaders" can be among the products of emergent behavior. They are not actually creating or even directing that behavior, but they can "for the duration of a particular flight" become points of a swarm's focal attention.

It is in the interest of technopoly to produce people who swarm. Swarming is virality. Swarms live by memes. Swarms produce best-sellers. Swarms form outrage mobs. For their sociality swarms need devices, platforms, and apps, and they need people for whom dwelling within the ambit of those devices, platforms, and apps is a habituated impulse, a thing they learned to do from everyone else who does it.

The apparent captain of technopoly is what Oakeshott calls a "rationalist" and what the historian of technology Evgeny Morozov calls a "solutionist," but that captain can achieve his political ends most readily by creating people who are *not* rationalists. The rationalists of Silicon Valley don't care whom you're calling out or why, as long as you're calling out *someone* and doing it on Twitter. And in that sense the most self-consciously radical people in our society tend also to be the most obedient and predictable. But the captain of technopoly is equally obedient and predictable: CEOs swarm too. They are ultimately as enthralled by the logic of technopoly as the meekest "end user."

Oakeshott wrote "The Tower of Babel" at roughly the same time as his most famous essay, "Rationalism in Politics" (1947), with which it shares certain themes. At that moment rationalism seemed, and indeed was, ascendant. Rejecting the value of habit and tradition—and of all authority except "reason"—the rationalist is concerned solely with the present as a problem to be solved by technique; politics simply *is* social

engineering. (The imaginative but ultimately unsuccessful Christian alternatives to rationalism are the subject of my recent book *The Year of Our Lord 1943* [Oxford University Press, 2018].) So those essays, like much of Oakeshott's other work, are meant to defend a model of the moral life as "a habit of affection and behaviour"—moral life learned, like a native language, "by living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner." Oakeshott foresaw the coming of a world—to him a sadly depleted world—in which everyone, or almost everyone, would be a rationalist.

But that isn't what happened. What happened was the elevation of a technocratic elite into a genuine technopoly, in which transnational powers in command of digital technologies sustain their nearly complete control by using the instruments of rationalism to ensure that the great majority of people acquire their moral life by habituation. This habituation, of course, is not the kind Oakeshott hoped for but a grossly impoverished version of it, one in which we do not adopt our affections and conduct from families, friends, and neighbors, but rather from the celebrity strangers who populate our digital devices. A commonwealth of rationalists would be better than this; but a commonwealth of rationalists is not in the cards.

Myth's Power to Move Us

These somber reflections lead us to James Poulos's recent essay in these pages, "For the Love of Mars" (Spring 2018). One may think I've taken an odd turn here, even a fanciful digression, but Poulos's argument for the colonization of the Red Planet, properly understood, points us to a way around or over the cultural impasse I have just sketched out. This will take some explaining.

If you were to seek out a proponent of Mars colonization and ask him or her why we should take up such a wildly ambitious and preposterously expensive project when we have so many apparently intractable problems on Earth—if you were to cast your question *in that register* of problems and solutions, investment and return—you would likely get a response in the same register. The colonization of Mars could ease the overcrowding of Earth. Experiments in the discovery and production of water that would be required for life on that dry planet could be easily transferred to an Earth increasingly prone to droughts. The manipulations of Mars's thin atmosphere that would be required to produce breathable air and a livable climate could provide technologies useful for addressing global warming and air pollution on Earth. Such a list of outcomes could be quite lengthy.

Should those claims not prove convincing, one might add what President Kennedy said in a speech that Poulos quotes approvingly: “We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.” Kennedy’s argument here resembles the case often made for studying dead languages: Such knowledge might not be useful in itself, but the learning of it teaches habits of mind that *are* useful.

So the colonization of Mars might provide a direct benefit (addressing the problem of overpopulation), a collateral benefit (technologies for coping with drought), or the indirect benefit of transferable skills or virtues. All of these arguments lie well within the technological core of culture and arise from the rationalist, solutionist philosophy underpinning it. But Poulos—and here is where his essay gets really interesting—doubts the power of such reasoning to move anyone not already moved. Poulos looks around him and sees a social world characterized by *acedia* (listlessness, boredom), especially among young people. Narrowly instrumental cases made on solutionist grounds are not, he believes, effective to counter *acedia*. But what is?

Poulos turns to Robert Zubrin, an aerospace engineer whose 1996 book *The Case for Mars* channels Frederick Jackson Turner’s late-nineteenth-century thesis on the essential role the lure of the frontier plays in the American mind. In that book Zubrin wrote: “Without a frontier from which to breathe new life, the spirit that gave rise to the progressive humanistic culture that America has represented for the past two centuries is fading. The issue is not just one of national loss—human progress needs a vanguard, and no replacement is in sight.” The “Founding Declaration” of the Mars Society, co-founded by Zubrin, extends the point:

We must go for our humanity. Human beings are more than merely another kind of animal; we are life’s messenger. Alone of the creatures of the Earth, we have the ability to continue the work of creation by bringing life to Mars, and Mars to life. In doing so, we shall make a profound statement as to the precious worth of the human race and every member of it...

We must go, not for us, but for a people who are yet to be. We must do it for the Martians.

These are invocations not of technological instrumentalism, of rationalism and solutionism, but of *myth*. It is this mythical propulsion of the collective will that Poulos believes we must draw upon, even though

the task is one that *seems* technological through and through, a problem defined by science and engineering. His essay is an exercise in programmatic jiu-jitsu, using the apparatus of rationalism to produce something else, an imaginative re-orientation of human ambition, a transformation of the problem-solving impulse into a new “habit of affection and behavior.” In “For the Love of Mars” the key word is *love*. Poulos offers us Oakeshott with rockets.

Through the Technological Core

The logic of Poulos’s essay is anticipated and made vivid in one of the most powerful achievements of recent American fiction, Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars trilogy—*Red Mars* (1992), *Green Mars* (1993), and *Blue Mars* (1996). Almost all those who colonize Mars—the First Hundred, they are called in the books—are scientists and engineers, but they do not all experience Mars in the same way, nor do they find agreement on why they are there and what, having arrived, they should do. As the enormously complex story develops, multiple perspectives emerge, but for our purposes here three figures have particular importance.

The first two characters are set in direct opposition to one another: Sax Russell dwells fully within the technological core and pursues with undoubting and unremitting energy the project of turning Mars into a habitable planet, of terraforming it; Ann Clayborne is a geologist (a student of Earth) who on Mars becomes an areologist (a student of Mars), who feels reverence and awe for the very *otherness* of the planet, and wants to keep the human footprint on it as small as possible. No terraforming for Ann, nor for anyone else, if she and her followers, who call themselves Red Mars, get their way. For Red Mars, terraforming is a kind of sacrilege, and to prevent it they employ a great range of tactics, including terrorism. For Sax, terraforming is the whole reason they’re on Mars. And in any case—thanks to the overwhelming influence of the “transnational” companies, which in this imagined future have a power greater than that of all but one or two nations—terraforming *will* happen. The best anyone with a conscience can do, then, is to try to make the inevitable transformation of the planet happen in the most constructive, least destructive ways possible—in ways that reduce the likelihood of Mars becoming another Earth, despoiled and polluted. The implacable resistance of Ann and Sax to each other is a major feature of the whole trilogy.

The third figure is Hiroko Ai, a biosphere designer who, once on Mars, gradually transforms herself into the leader of a quasi-religious

movement. The goal of this movement is to achieve what Hiroko calls *areophany*, a state of spiritual enlightenment in which Mars itself shows forth as a revelation:

It was a kind of landscape religion, a consciousness of Mars as a physical space suffused with *kami*, which was the spiritual energy or power that rested in the land itself. *Kami* was manifested most obviously in certain extraordinary objects in the landscape—stone pillars, isolated ejecta, sheer cliffs, oddly smoothed crater interiors, the broad circular peaks of the great volcanoes. These intensified expressions of Mars’s *kami* had a Terran analogue within the colonists themselves, the power that Hiroko called *viriditas*, that greening fructiparous power within, which knows that the wild world itself is holy. *Kami, viriditas*; it was the combination of these sacred powers that would allow humans to exist here in a meaningful way.

Think of this as the great Third Way of Martian colonization. It is a myth made neither of accommodation to the technopolic inevitable (Sax Russell), nor of resistance to it (Ann Clayborne), but arising rather from a serene refusal of that dichotomy and its replacement by what we might call an emergent transcendence. Sax and Ann alike, when they think about Mars, think as *Terrans*—as aliens, as people from elsewhere, as strangers to Mars. But from the areophanic perspective both positions are equally wrong: neither can encounter the *kami* and draw on the *viriditas*. The question of whether to terraform or not is the *wrong question*; it is a question that can be asked only from being spiritually un-Martian. Areophany transcends the question, but, as it were, from below: from immersion in what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called the “inscape” of an environment, its inner form, from which its external appearance arises. Hiroko and her followers attend to that inscape and await their absorption and transformation by the *kami* of Mars. As a result, they are violently attacked, persecuted, driven into hiding, and perhaps even exterminated.

The lessons that I think we may draw from this sketch of three major perspectives in Robinson’s Mars novels are as follows: In an ever more highly developed technological future, mere accommodation will be co-opted; simple resistance will be unsustainable; naked myth-making will be despised and uprooted. But there may be an alternative. The great hope of the books is that one can *pass through* the technological to the mythical. There may be a path to areophany, to transcendence, that leads first to altering the landscape—terraforming—and then to another kind of transformation, *areoforming*.

What does this mean? At times in the trilogy the narration seems to step away from the characters and events and to look at the colonization of Mars as if from a great distance—the passages in which this happens are marked by italics. Here is one key passage from *Green Mars*:

Of course all the genetic templates for our new biota are Terran; the minds designing them are Terran; but the terrain is Martian. And terrain is a powerful genetic engineer, determining what flourishes and what doesn't, pushing along progressive differentiation, and thus the evolution of new species. And as the generations pass, all the members of a biosphere evolve together, adapting to their terrain in a complex communal response, a creative self-designing ability. This process, no matter how much we intervene in it, is essentially out of our control. Genes mutate, creatures evolve: a new biosphere emerges, and with it a new noosphere [mind sphere]. And eventually the designers' minds, along with everything else, have been forever changed.

This is the process of areoformation.

No matter how detailed and specific and imaginative the plans of humans may be, the *kami* of a landscape will gradually turn those plans toward its own character, its own conformation. Something will *emerge*, and what emerges will never be what was planned, though it may incorporate some elements of the planning if those run with the grain, as it were, of the environment. The shaping of the planners by the Martian landscape they wish to control: this is areoformation.

The landscape's reshaping of the settlers naturally leads to a new philosophy on how the settlers should reshape the landscape. In the third volume of the trilogy, Sax Russell visits a community of people engaged in a sophisticated practice of landscape design they call *ecopoesis*: "terraforming redefined, subtilized, localized. Transmuted into something like Hiroko's areoformation. No longer powered by heavy industrial global methods, but by the slow, steady, and intensely local process of working on individual patches of land." One of these people, Tariki, tells Sax, "Mars is all a garden. Earth too for that matter. This is what humans have become. So we have to think about gardening, about that level of responsibility to the land." Sax is puzzled by this notion because he is used to thinking of Mars as a wilderness; but the ecopoets think that on Mars "wilderness too is a garden now." And, says Tariki, "ecopoesis is closer to your vision of wilderness than industrial terraforming ever was."

Sax is not certain about this, but he has a thought: That perhaps terraforming and ecopoesis are "just two stages of a process. Both necessary." And then another thought: "Ann should be here." Sax wants

Ann Clayborne to see that there may be a way forward that requires neither “industrial terraforming” nor simply leaving Mars as it was when humans first arrived, that is fundamentally congruent with the *kami* of the place. Ann’s vision in spirit, if not to the letter, so Sax hopes. Even if his earlier terraforming impulse was misbegotten, imperialistic, and unjustifiably dominating, something of value, something life-affirming and life-organizing, may lie beyond it. The hope—and I see this as the books’ hope—is that actions on Mars that arise from the technological core of civilization can, thanks to the emergent power of areoformation, be transformed into something with a truly mythical power. Perhaps they can even do so without invoking the mysticism of Hiroko’s areophany.

It is tempting to reply: Isn’t it pretty to think so? But Robinson’s novels, and Poulos’s essay, are not so easily dismissed. They suggest that straightforward resistance to technocratic “rationalism in politics” is not the only option for the uncomfortable. They further suggest that some myths are better than others. If technocratic rationalism is ultimately self-destructive, either through the damage it inflicts on the environment (whether Terran or Martian) or the *ennui* it inflicts on humans who trust in it, we see in these visions of a Martian future the possibility that technocratic rationalism can be not averted but transcended—that there is something better, not in opposition to it, but on the other side of it. Something that will in time emerge.

After Technopoly

We have taken a somewhat tortuous path from Michael Oakeshott to campus protesters to visions of the colonization of Mars. But the road back, perhaps, will not be so strange. We may commence the return journey thus: The novels of Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars trilogy constitute a vast thought experiment in the political, ecological, and technological shaping of a new world, a frontier. What do we learn from that experiment that can be used in our current moment and location?

First, if there is a place in the world for those who treasure a myth that claims to transcend technopoly, it will be, at best, a hidden place. If transnational technopoly can hunt you down and root you out, it will; and it probably can. Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, dissenting from his Irish Catholic culture, said that his weapons would be “silence, exile, and cunning.” To those whose dissent from technopoly is rooted deeply in a mythological core, these are words to survive by.

Second, *open* resistance to the regime, arising from no transcendent myth but merely deep outrage, may be able to delay some of technopoly's victories but can prevent none. A sense of taboos violated is no more than a myth in decay, and cannot resist for long. Here the relevant literary text is J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Gandalf agrees that Denethor, Steward of Gondor, was right to say that "You may triumph on the fields... for a day, but against the Power that has now risen, there is no victory."

Third, the "antimythological myth" of technopoly, to borrow a term from W. H. Auden's "In Praise of Limestone," exhausts both its adherents and itself, leaving behind an irresistible *ennui*. Technopoly eventually collapses under the weight of its own successes, which suggests that sooner or later, when pressed for self-justification, the rationalism of the technological core needs a mythical propulsion. Perhaps in the long run there is no purely technological core after all, but rather a technological "shell"; perhaps the choice is between a mythical core that knows itself as such and one that doesn't. If so, then technopoly's production of people who live within the mythical core may ultimately be self-defeating—if the people so formed end up choosing a better myth than the one technopoly proffers.

Let us applaud those mythmakers who seek their own quiet corner to develop their stories, their communities. Let us applaud also overt resistance to the regime of technopoly, if it is nonviolent. But we also need people who have the resourcefulness to turn the anti-mythological myth of technopoly against itself before its coming collapse implicates us all. To find the better path, we need to re-educate ourselves in mythmaking and in the right reception of myth.