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Technophilia, An Infantile Disorder

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A rejoinder to an authoritarian polemic by “Walter Alter” published in *Fringe Ware Review*. The magazine didn’t publish it, except for several sample paragraphs, but did post it on the Internet. It also appeared in *Green Anarchist*, BCM 1715, London WCIN 3XX

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If patriotism is, as Samuel Johnson said, the last refuge of a scoundrel, scientism is by now the first. It’s the only ideology which, restated in cyberbabble, projects the look-and-feel of futurity even as it conserves attitudes and values essential to keeping things just as they are. Keep on zapping!

The *abstract* affirmation of “change” is conservative, not progressive. It privileges all change, apparent or real, stylistic or substantive, reactionary or revolutionary. The more things change — the more *things* that change — the more they stay the same. Faster, faster, Speed Racer! — (but keep going in circles).

For much the same reason the privileging of progress is also conservative. Progress is the notion that change tends toward improvement and improvement tends to be irreversible. Local setbacks occur as change is stalled or misdirected (“the ether,” “phlogiston”) but the secular tendency is forward (and secular). Nothing goes very wrong for very long, so there is never any compelling reason *not* to just keep doing what you’re doing. It’s gonna be all right. As some jurist once put it in another (but

startlingly similar) context, the wheels of justice turn slowly, but they grind fine.

As his pseudonym suggests, Walter Alter is a self-sanctified high priest of progress (but does he know that in German, *alter* means “older”?). He disdains the past the better to perpetuate it. His writing only in small letters — how modernist! — was quite the rage when e.e. cummings pioneered it 80 years ago. Perhaps Alter’s next advance will be to abandon punctuation only a few decades after James Joyce did. And well under 3000 years since the Romans did both. The pace of progress can be dizzying.

For Alter, the future is a program that Karl Marx and Jules Verne mapped out in a previous century. Evolution is unilinear, technologically driven and, for some strange reason, morally imperative. These notions were already old when Herbert Spencer and Karl Marx cobbled them together. Alter’s positivism is no improvement on that of Comte, who gave the game away by founding a Positivist Church. And his mechanical materialism is actually a regression from Marxism to Stalinism. Like bad science fiction, but not as entertaining, Alterism is 19th century ideology declaimed in 21st century jargon. (One of the few facts about the future at once certain and reassuring is that it will *not* talk like Walter Alter any more than the present talks like Hugo Gernsback.) Alter hasn’t written one word with which Newt Gingrich or Walt Disney, defrosted, would disagree. The “think tank social engineers” are on *his* side; or rather, he’s on theirs. They don’t think the way he does — that barely qualifies as thinking at all — but they want *us* to think the way he does. The only reason he isn’t on their payroll is why pay him if he’s willing to do it for nothing?

“Info overload is relative to your skill level,” intones Alter. It’s certainly relative to *his*. He bounces from technology to anthropology to history and back again like the atoms of the Newtonian billiard-ball universe that scientists, unlike Alter, no longer believe in. The breadth of his ignorance amazes, a won-

dering world can only, with Groucho Marx, ask: “Is there anything else you know absolutely nothing about?” If syndicalism is (as one wag put it) fascism minus the excitement, Alterism is empiricism minus the evidence. He sports the toga of reason without stating any reason for doing so. He expects us to take his rejection of faith on faith. He fiercely affirms that facts are facts without mentioning any.

Alter is much too upset to be articulate, but at least he’s provided an enemies list — although, like Senator McCarthy, he would rather issue vague categorical denunciations than name names. High on the list are “primitivo-nostalgic” “anthro-romanticists” who are either also, or are giving aid and comfort to, “anti-authoritarians” of the “anarcho-left.” To the lay reader all these mysterious hyphenations are calculated to inspire a vague dread without communicating any information whom they refer to except dupes of the think tank social engineers and enemies of civilization. But why should the think tank social engineers want to destroy the civilization in which they flourish at the expense of most of the rest of us?

If by religion is meant reverence for something not understood, Alter is fervently religious. He mistakes science for codified knowledge (that was natural history, long since as defunct as phrenology). Science is a social practice with distinctive methods, not an accumulation of officially certified “facts.” There are no naked, extracontextual facts. Facts are always relative to a context. Scientific facts are relative to a theory or a paradigm (*i.e.*, to a formalized context). Are electrons particles or waves? Neither and both, according to Niels Bohr — it depends on where you are looking from and why. Are the postulates and theorems of Euclidean geometry “true”? They correspond very well to much of the physical universe, but Einstein found that Riemann’s non-Euclidean geometry better described such crucial phenomena as gravitation and the deflection of light rays. Each geometry is internally consistent; each is inconsistent with the other. No conceivable fact or facts

would resolve their discrepancy. As much as they would like to transcend the inconsistency, physicists have learned to live with the incommensurable theories of relativity and quantum physics because they both work (almost). Newtonian physics is still very serviceable inside the solar system, where there are still a few “facts” (like the precession of Mercury) not amenable to Einsteinian relativity, but the latter is definitely the theory of choice for application to the rest of the universe. To call the one true and the other false is like calling a Toyota true and a Model-T false.

Theories create facts — and theories destroy them. Science is simultaneously, and necessarily, progressive and regressive. Unlike Walter Alter, science privileges neither direction. There is no passive, preexisting, “organised, patterned, predicted and graspable” universe out there awaiting our Promethean touch. Insofar as the Universe is orderly — which, for all we know, may not be all that far — *we make it so*. Not only in the obvious sense that we form families and build cities, ordering our own life-ways, but merely by the patterning power of perception, by which we resolve a welter of sense-data into a “table” where there are “really” only a multitude of tiny particles and mostly empty space.

Alter rages against *obnosis*, his ill-formed neologism for ignoring the obvious. But ignoring the obvious is “obviously” the precondition for science. As S.F.C. Milsom put it, “things that are obvious cannot be slightly wrong: like the movement of the sun, they can only be fundamentally wrong.” Obviously the sun circles the earth. Obviously the earth is flat. Obviously the table before me is solid, not, as atomic-science mystics claim, almost entirely empty space. Obviously particles cannot also be waves. Obviously human society is impossible without a state. Obviously hunter-gatherers work harder than contemporary wage-laborers. Obviously the death penalty deters crime. But nothing is more obvious, if anything is, than that all these propositions are false. Which is to say, they cannot qualify as “facts”

as its context of discovery is a very unscientific reason to reject evolution. Or, for that matter, to accept it.

Alter is not what he pretends to be, a paladin of reason assailing the irrationalist hordes. The only thing those on his enemies list have in common is that they’re on it. Ayn Rand, whose hysterical espousal of “reason” was Alterism without the pop science jargon, had a list of irrationalists including homosexuals, liberals, Christians, anti-Zionists, Marxists, abstract expressionists, hippies, technophobes, racists, and smokers of pot (but not tobacco). Alter’s list (surely incomplete) includes sado-masochists, New Agers, anthropologists, schizophrenics, anti-authoritarians, Christian Fundamentalists, think tank social engineers, Fascists, proto-Cubists ... Round up the unusual suspects. Alter’s just playing a naming-and-blaming game because he doesn’t get enough tool extensions.

“How many times a day do you really strike forward on important matters intuitively?” Well said — and as good a point as any to give this guy the hook. Riddle me this, Mr. or Ms. Reader: *How many times a day do you really strike forward on important matters AT ALL?* How many times a day do you “strike forward on important matters” — intuitively, ironically, intellectually, impulsively, impassively, or any damn way? Or do you find as day follows day that day follows day, and that’s about it? That the only “important matters” that affect you, if there even are any, are decided, if they even are, by somebody else? Have you noticed your lack of power to chart your own destiny? That your access to “virtual” reality increases in proportion as you distance yourself (a prudent move) from the real thing? That aside from working and paying, you are of absolutely no use to this society and can’t expect to be kept around after you can’t do either? And finally, does Walter Alter’s technophilic techno-capitalist caterwauling in any way help you to interpret the future, much less — and much more important — to change it?

thinks the solar system actually is an orrery. He has no tolerance for ambiguity, relativity, indeterminacy — no tolerance, in fact, for tolerance.

Alter seems to have learned nothing of science except some badly bumbled-up jargon. In denouncing “bad scientific method” and “intuition” in almost the same bad breath, he advertises his ignorance of the pluralism of scientific method. Even so resolute a positivist as Karl Popper distinguished the “context of justification,” which he thought entailed compliance with a rather rigid demonstrative orthodoxy, from the “context of discovery” where, as Paul Feyerabend gleefully observed, “anything goes.” Alter reveals how utterly out of it he is by a casual reference to “true methods of discovery.” *There are no true methods of discovery*, only useful ones. In principle, reading the Bible or dropping acid is as legitimate a practice in the context of discovery as is keeping up with the technical journals. Whether Archimedes actually gleaned inspiration from hopping in the tub or Newton from watching an apple fall is not important. What’s important is that these — any — triggers to creativity are possible and, if effective, desirable.

Intuition is important, not as an occult authoritative faculty, but as a source of hypotheses in all fields. And also of insights not yet, if ever, formalizable, but nonetheless meaningful and heuristic in the hermeneutic disciplines which rightfully refuse to concede that if they are not susceptible to quantification they are mystical. Many disciplines since admitted to the pantheon of science (such as biology, geology and economics) would have been aborted by this anachronistic dogma. “Consider the source” is what Alter calls “bad scientific method.” We hear much (too much) of the conflict between evolutionism and creationism. It takes only a nodding acquaintance with Western intellectual history to recognize that the theory of evolution is a secularization of the eschatology which distinguishes Christianity from other religious traditions. But having Christianity

within any framework which even their own proponents acknowledge as their own. Indeed, all the advocates (of such of these opinions as still have any) stridently affirm, like Alter, a positivist-empiricist framework in which their falsity is conspicuous.

So then — to get down to details — forward into the past. Alter rants against what he calls the “romanticist attachment to a ‘simpler,’ ‘purer’ existence in past times or among contemporary primitive or ‘Eastern’ societies.” Hold it right there. Nobody that I know of is conflating past or present primitive societies with “Eastern” societies (presumably the civilizations of China and India and their offshoots in Japan, Korea, Burma, Southeast Asia, Indonesia, etc.). These “Eastern” societies much more closely resemble the society — ours — which “anarcho-leftists” want to overthrow than they do any primitive society. Both feature the state, the market, class stratification and sacerdotally controlled religion, which are absent from all band (forager) societies and many tribal societies. If primitive and Eastern societies have common features of any importance to his argument (had he troubled to formulate one) Alter does not identify them.

For Alter it is a “crushing reality that the innate direction that any sentient culture will take to amplify its well-being will be to increase the application of tool-extensions.” Cultures are not “sentient”; that is to reify and mystify their nature. Nor do cultures necessarily have any “innate direction.” As an ex-(or crypto-) Marxist — he is a former (?) follower of Lyndon LaRouche in his Stalinist, “National Caucus of Labor Committees” phase — Alter has no excuse for not knowing this. Although Marx was most interested in a mode of production — capitalism — which, he argued, did have an innate direction, he also identified an “Asiatic mode of production” which did not; Karl Wittfogel elaborated on the insight in his *Oriental Despotism*. Our seer prognosticates that “if that increase stops, the culture will die.” This we know to be false.

If Alter is correct, for a society to regress to a simpler technology is inevitably suicidal. Anthropologists know better. For Alter it's an article of faith that agriculture is technologically superior to foraging. But the ancestors of the Plains Indians were sedentary or semisedentary agriculturists who abandoned that life-way because the arrival of the horse made possible (not necessary) the choice of a simpler hunting existence which they must have adjudged qualitatively superior. The Kpelle of Liberia refuse to switch from dry- to wet-cultivation of rice, their staple food, as economic development "experts" urge them to. The Kpelle are well aware that wet (irrigated) rice farming is much more productive than dry farming. But dry farming is conducted communally, with singing and feasting and drinking, in a way which wet farming cannot be — and it's much easier work at a healthier, more comfortable "work station." If their culture should "die" as a result of this eminently reasonable choice it will be murder, not suicide. If by progress Alter means exterminating people because we can and because they're different, he can take his progress and shove it. He defames science by defending it.

Even the history of Western civilization (the only one our ethnocentric futurist takes seriously) contradicts Alter's theory of technological will-to-power. For well over a thousand years, classical civilization flourished without any significant "application of tool extension." Even when Hellenistic or Roman science advanced, its technology usually did not. It created the steam engine, then forgot about the toy, as China (another counter-example to Alterism) invented gunpowder and used it to scare away demons — arguably its best use. Of course, ancient societies came to an end, but they all do: as Keynes put it, in the long run, we will all be dead.

And I have my suspicions about the phrase "tool extension." Isn't something to do with that advertised in the back of porn magazines?

The communist-anarchist hunter-gatherers (for that is what, to be precise, they are), past and present, are *important*. Not (necessarily) for their successful habitat-specific adaptations since these are, by definition, not generalizable. But because they demonstrate that life once was, that life can be, *radically different*. The point is not to recreate that way of life (although there may be some occasions to do that) but to appreciate that, if a life-way so utterly contradictory to ours is feasible, which indeed has a million-year track record, then maybe other life-ways contradictory to ours are feasible.

For a 21st century schizoid man of wealth and taste, Alter has an awfully retarded vocabulary. He assumes that babytalk babblewords like "good" and "evil" mean something more than "me like" and "me no like," but if they do mean anything more to him he hasn't distributed the surplus to the rest of us. He accuses his chosen enemies of "infantilism and anti-parental vengeance," echoing the authoritarianism of Lenin ("*Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*") and Freud, respectively. A typical futurist — and the original Futurists *did* embrace Fascism — he's about a century behind Heisenberg and Nietzsche and the rest of us. Moralism is retrograde. You want something? Don't tell me you're "right" and I'm "wrong," I don't care what God or Santa Claus likes, never mind if I've been naughty or nice. Just tell me what you want that I have and why I should give it to you. I can't guarantee we'll come to terms, but articulation succeeded by negotiation is the only possible way to settle a dispute without coercion. As Proudhon put it, "I want no laws, but I am ready to bargain."

Alter clings to objective "physical reality" — matter in motion — with the same faith a child clutches his mother's hand. And faith, for Alter and children of all ages, is always shadowed by fear. Alter is (to quote Clifford Geertz) "afraid reality is going to go away unless we believe very hard in it." He'll never experience an Oedipal crisis because he'll never grow up that much. A wind-up world is the only kind he can understand. He

who insists that ideas he cannot accept or understand are Fascist. I cannot denounce this kind of jerkoff opportunism too strongly. “Fascist” is not, as Alter supposes, an all-purpose epithet synonymous with “me no like.” I once wrote an essay, “Feminism as Fascism,” which occasioned a great deal of indignation, although it has held up only too well. But I didn’t mind that because I’d been careful and specific about identifying the precise parallels between Fascism and so-called (radical) feminism — about half a dozen. That’s half a dozen more analogies between feminism and Fascism than Alter identifies between Fascism and anarcho-leftism or primito-nostalgia. The only anarcho-leftists with any demonstrable affinities to Fascism (to which, in Italy, they provided many recruits) are the Syndicalists, a dwindling sect, the last anarchists to share Alter’s retrograde scientism. It’s Alter, not his enemies, who calls for “a guiding, cohesive body of knowledge and experience as a frame of reference” — just *one* frame of reference, mind you — for “diagrams and manuals,” for *marching orders*. There happen to be real-life Fascists in this imperfect world of ours. By trivializing the word, Alter (who is far from alone in this), purporting to oppose Fascists, in fact equips them with a cloaking device.

Artists, wails Walter, “don’t believe that technology is a good thing, intrinsically.” I don’t much care what artists believe, especially if Alter is typical of them, but their reported opinion does them credit. I’d have thought it *obnosis*, ignoring the obvious, to believe in technology “intrinsically,” not as the means to an end or ends it’s marketed as, but as some sort of be-all and end-all of no use to anybody. Art-for-art’s-sake is a debatable credo but at least it furnishes art which for some pleases by its beauty. Technology for its own sake makes no sense at all, no more than Dr. Frankenstein’s monster. If tech-for-tech’s sake isn’t the antithesis of reason, I don’t know reason from squat and I’d rather not.

Alter must be lying, not merely mistaken, when he reiterates the Hobbesian myth that “primitive life is short and brutal.” He cannot possibly even be aware of the existence of those he tags as anthro-romanticists without knowing that they have demonstrated otherwise to the satisfaction of their fellow scientists. The word “primitive” is for many purposes — including this one — too vague and overinclusive to be useful. It might refer to anything from the few surviving hunter-gathering societies to the ethnic minority peasantry of modernizing Third World states (like the Indians of Mexico or Peru). Life expectancy is a case in point. Alter wants his readers to suppose that longevity is a function of techno-social complexity. It isn’t, and it isn’t the opposite either. As Richard Borshay Lee ascertained, the Kung San (“Bushmen”) of Botswana have a population structure closer to that of the United States than to that of the typical Third World country with its peasant majority. Foragers’ lives are not all that short. Only recently have the average lifespans in the privileged metropolis nations surpassed prehistoric rates.

As for whether the lives of primitives are “brutal,” as compared to those of, say, Detroiters, that is obviously a moralistic, not a scientific, judgment. If brutality refers to the quality of life, foragers, as Marshall Sahlins demonstrated in “The Original Affluent Society,” work much less and socialize and party much more than we moderns do. None of them take orders from an asshole boss or get up before noon or work a five-day week or — well, you get the idea.

Alter smugly observes that “damn few aboriginal societies are being created and lived in fully by those doing the praising [of them].” No shit. So what? These societies never were created; they evolved. The same industrial and capitalist forces which are extinguishing existing aboriginal societies place powerful obstacles to forming new ones. What we deplore is precisely what we have lost, including the skills to recreate it.

Alter is just cheerleading for the pigs. Like I said, they'd pay him (but probably not very well) if he weren't doing it for free.

Admittedly an occasional anthropologist and an occasional "anarcho-leftist" has in some respects romanticized primitive life at one time or another, but on nothing like the scale on which Alter falsifies the ethnographic record. Richard Borshay Lee and Marshall Sahlins today represent the conventional wisdom as regards hunter-gatherer societies. They don't romanticize anything. They don't have to. A romanticist would claim that the primitive society he or she studies is virtually free of conflict and violence, as did Elizabeth Marshall Thomas in her book on the San/Bushmen, *The Harmless People*. Lee's later, more painstaking observations established *per capita* homicide rates for the San not much lower than from those of the contemporary United States. Sahlins made clear that the tradeoff for the leisurely, well-fed hunting-gathering life was not accumulating any property which could not be conveniently carried away. Whether this is any great sacrifice is a value judgment, not a scientific finding — a distinction to which Alter is as oblivious as any medieval monk.

About the only specific reference Alter makes is to Margaret Mead, "a semi-literate sectarian specializing in 'doping the samples' when they didn't fit into her pre-existent doctrine" (never specified). Mead was poorly trained prior to her first fieldwork in Samoa, but to call the author of a number of well-written best-sellers "semi-literate" falls well short of even semi-literate, it's just plain stupid. I'd say Alter was a semi-literate sectarian doping the facts except that he's really a semi-literate sectarian ignoring the facts.

Mead's major conclusions were that the Samoans were sexually liberal and that they were, relative to interwar Americans, more cooperative than competitive. Mead — the bisexual protege of the lesbian Ruth Benedict — may well have projected her own sexual liberalism onto the natives. But modern ethnographies (such as Robert Suggs' *Mangaia*) as well as historical

sources from Captain Cook forwards confirm that most Pacific island societies *really were* closer to the easygoing hedonistic idyll Mead thought she saw in Samoa than to some Hobbesian horrorshow. Alter rails against romanticism, subjectivity, mysticism — the usual suspects — but won't look the *real*, regularly replicated facts about primitive society in the face. He's in denial.

If Mead's findings as to sexuality and maturation have been revised by subsequent fieldwork, her characterization of competition and cooperation in the societies she studied has not. By any standard, our modern (state-) capitalist society is what statisticians call an outlier — a sport, a freak, a monster — at an extraordinary distance from most observations, the sort that pushes variance and variation far apart. There is no "double standard employing an extreme criticism against all bourgeoisie [sic], capitalist, spectacular, commodity factors" — the departure is only as extreme as the departure from community as it's been experienced by most hominid societies for the last several million years. It's as if Alter denounced a yardstick as prejudiced because it establishes that objects of three feet or more are longer than all those that are not. If this is science, give me mysticism or give me death.

Alter insinuates, without demonstrating, that Mead faked evidence. Even if she did, we know that many illustrious scientists, among them Galileo and Gregor Mendel, faked or fudged reports of their experiments to substantiate conclusions now universally accepted. Mendel, to make matters worse, was a Catholic monk, a "mystic" according to Alter's demonology, and yet he founded the science of genetics. Alter, far from founding any science, gives no indication of even beginning to understand any of them.

The merits and demerits of Margaret Mead's ethnography are less than peripheral to Alter's polemic. It wasn't Mead who discovered and reported that hunter-gatherers work a lot less than we do. There is something very off about a control freak