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Technocracy and the Body

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Of the many revolutionary developments of the twentieth century, Paul VI wrote in *Humanae vitae*, the “most remarkable of all is to be seen in man’s stupendous progress in the domination and rational organization of the forces of nature, to the point that he is endeavoring to extend this control over every aspect of his own life—over his body, over his mind and emotions, over his social life, and even over the laws that regulate the transmission of life.” This was not a novel assessment. *Gaudium et spes* had already declared that “the human race is involved in a new stage of history . . . triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of man.”^[1] These energies “recoil upon him, upon his decisions and desires, both individual and collective, and upon his manner of thinking and acting with respect to things and people.”^[2] The “spiritual agitation and changing conditions of life” in this new era spring from modern science and technology, which have transformed both the theoretical and the practical orders.^[3]

This ambivalence toward technological society would mark the remainder of Paul VI’s pontificate. He worried that the opening which the 1960s seemed to offer to Christian transcendence might in reality be the “more accentuated sliding towards a new positivism: universalized technology as the dominant form of activity, as the overwhelming pattern of existence, even as a language, without the question of its meaning being really asked.”^[4] John Paul II would soon echo this worry, observing in *Redemptor hominis*, that “the man of today seems ever to be under threat from what he produces.” “This seems to make up the main chapter of the drama of present-day human existence in its broadest and universal dimension,” the pope says.^[5] Benedict XVI, taking up the theme, would later explain that “technology is never merely technology.”^[6] Because it objectifies man’s subjectivity, “it tends to become an ideological power that threatens to confine us within an *a priori* that holds us back from encountering being and truth. Were that to happen, we would all know, evaluate, and make decisions about our life situations from within a technocratic cultural perspective to which we would belong structurally, without ever being able to discover a meaning not of our own making.”^[7]

Pope Francis seems convinced that this technological confinement has already come to pass, at

least judging from *Laudato si'*.^[8] He laments “the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm. This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who approaches and gains control over an external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, *which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation.*”^[9] He calls this the “technocratic paradigm,” which “sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere ‘given,’ as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into a useful shape.”^[10] So powerful is it that “the idea of promoting a different cultural paradigm and employing technology as a mere instrument is nowadays inconceivable. The technocratic paradigm has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilize them without being dominated by their internal logic.”^[11]

It is amazing in retrospect how the question occasioned by chemical contraception was from the very first embedded within the question concerning technology, and it is equally amazing how oblivious proponents of a change in church teaching were to this fact, both in the late 60s and now. This is even more striking given the history of the twentieth century. Man’s endeavor “to extend this control over every aspect of his own life” did not begin when the contraceptive pill dropped miraculously from the sky.

The ambition to exert this kind of control is latent in modern conceptions of nature and science. It acquired a new and urgent impetus with the 1871 publication of Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*, with its proto-eugenical anxiety that our evolved benevolence permitted the Irish to breed like rabbits and thereby thwarted the favoritism of Natural Selection toward the English. Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton would soon coin the very term ‘eugenics’ for the endeavor to set things right. It found political expression in the progressive era of the 1920s and 30s, with its dream of a society collectively organized for the pursuit of scientific progress. And it proceeded unabated until the atrocities of the Second World War forced a change of names, if not of intent. The Galton Chair of Eugenics at University College London, for example, became the Galton Chair of Genetics. Genetic hygiene became genetic counseling. And so on.

The forced sterilization laws that prevailed on both sides of the Atlantic are a well-known artifact of this era, as was the international birth control movement. Less well-known perhaps, but even more remarkable, is the fusion of progressive-era Christianity and the eugenic ideal—it is unlikely that eugenics could have flourished so otherwise—to the point that prominent Protestant ministers in the US would compete with one another in sermon contests sponsored by the American Eugenics Society^[12]: “The Christian asks: how many, how healthy?”, according to the prominent Episcopal clergyman Phillips Osgood. Christine Rosen has documented this remarkable story in her *Preaching Eugenics*, while Amy Laura Hall has shown how deeply American Christians internalized the eugenical ideal: dramatically reducing their family sizes within a generation, anxiously measuring their children by the new standards of ‘scientific parenting,’ and parading their families about like livestock at the county fair in “fitter family” competitions around the country. All the while, trusted household brands like Lysol subtly marketed themselves as “feminine hygiene products,” that is, abortifacients, to women of my grandmother’s generation.^[13]

Catholics, otherwise the staunchest opponents of eugenics, were not invulnerable to the eugenical temptation, despite the fact that they were more likely to be the objects of it. But, according to Christine Rosen, among all faiths

the evidence yields a clear pattern about who elected to support eugenic-style reforms and who did not. Religious leaders pursued eugenics precisely when

they moved away from traditional religious tenets. The liberals and modernists in their respective faiths—those who challenged their churches to conform to modern circumstances—became the eugenics movement’s most enthusiastic supporters.[14]

The mindset forged during the eugenics era formed the cultural backdrop to the notorious decision of the Lambeth Conference in 1930 and for the promulgation of *Casti connubii* that same year, and its expectations formed part of the calculation in the first use of the phrase “responsible parenthood” that I have so far been able to find: in a 1963 policy statement of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the US.[15]

Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. Some fifty years later, we find ourselves increasingly confronting a new eugenics, more powerful if less obviously authoritarian than the old.[16] The continuity between them is concealed by the fact that the new eugenics is no longer a program controlled by the state in the service of a master race fantasy, but a biotechnocratic system controlled by no one in particular at the service of economic exigencies, the expectations of bureaucratic and industrialized medicine, and rapidly changing human archetypes and consumer preferences. And by the fact that its victims are mostly children who are invisible and without voice. As it was with the old eugenics, so it is with the new, as progressive clerics hasten to champion these new archetypes in the name, if not quite of freedom and progress, then of “respect, compassion, and sensitivity.” Yet the sexual revolution does not exist outside of the technological revolution, which is its condition of possibility and the very point at which man’s technology “recoils upon him.” The new “liberals and modernists” owe us an explanation of how they can abstract and affirm one element of this system—say, the LGBT identity—without simultaneously affirming the radical redefinition of man, woman, and child, the technological reduction of human nature, and the technological manipulation of the human body necessary to bring it about. They form a seamless garment.

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[1] John Paul II, *Gaudium et spes*, 4.

[2] *Ibid.*, 4.

[3] *Ibid.*, 4–5.

[4] Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens*, 29.

[5] John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, 15.

[6] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 14, 69.

[7] *Ibid.*, 70.

[8] For a more extended engagement with this encyclical, see Michael Hanby, “The Gospel of Creation and the Technocratic Paradigm: Reflections on a Central Teaching of *Laudato Si’*,” in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 42.4 (Winter 2015): 724–47.

[9] Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, 106, emphasis mine.

[10] *Laudato si'*, 115, citing Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), 55.

[11] *Laudato si'*, 108.

[12] See Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[13] Amy Laura Hall, *Conceiving Parenthood: American Protestantism and the Spirit of Reproduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 21–290.

[14] Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 184.

[15] See “Responsible Parenthood,” *The Family Life Coordinator*, Vol. 12, No. 3/4 (Jul.–Oct., 1963), 111–13.

[16] Evelyn Fox Keller comments on the distinction: “Whereas the eugenics programs of the earlier part of the century had to rely on massive social programs, and hence were subject to social control, molecular genetics seemed to enable what Robert Sinsheimer called a ‘new eugenics’—a eugenics that “could, at least in principle, be implemented on a quite individual basis.” Sinsheimer added,

The old eugenics was limited to a numerical enhancement of the best of our existing gene pool. The new eugenics would permit in principle the conversion of the unfit to the highest genetic level.

Sinsheimer, “The Prospect of Designed Genetic Change,” *Engineering and Science* 32 (1969): 8–13; cited in Keller, “Nature, Nurture, and the Human Genome Project,” in Daniel Kevles and Leroy Hood (eds), *The Code of Codes: Scientific and Social Issues in the Human Genome Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 289.

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