

Review of: "Possibilism in Technology: A Spanish-Speaking Response to Technological Determinism"

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This article proposes that there is a distinct tradition of technological ‘possibilism’ in the Spanish language tradition. Possibilism is contrasted with determinism. In conclusion, the author develops some of the implications of technological possibilism.

To support the thesis, it is necessary to show that there is something specific to Spanish approaches to technology, agency, and the relationship between technological developments and their uptake or impact on other aspects of society. To do this, it is necessary to both define the characteristics of the Spanish tradition and also to show how it diverges from other traditions. Non-hispanophone authors cited in the paper are mainly French (from Ellul to Stiegler) and anglophone (from Mumford to various ‘futurists’), with Marx being the only one who wrote in German.

The argument for a Spanish tradition makes a good start with the author’s critique of the concept of a ‘human essence’ underlying technological determinism (p. 2). Ortega y Gasset’s rejection of this concept, in his maxim, ‘man has no essence but history’, is then taken as the foundation of the Spanish approach. It is a useful starting point, leading into Ortega’s major work on technology, developed some twenty years later, *Meditación de la Técnica*. In this brief article, there is frustratingly little development of this aspect of Ortega’s work, but the attention to it is important.

The author better elaborates on the work of Fernando Broncano, and again it is valuable that this has been drawn to the attention of an anglophone audience. The notion of possibilism, derived from Broncano’s work, is well developed. Table 1 is most helpful in understanding the key concepts of physical, imagined, pragmatic, and legitimate possibilities. The relationship between them is clearly expounded with the help of a Venn diagram (fig. 2).

In addition to giving some insight into this neglected Spanish tradition, the author tries to establish the points of difference between it and the traditions in other languages. Here, I feel the article is less successful. The opposition between possibilism and determinism carries too much weight in this argument. It may not have been necessary, and perhaps was not even the author’s intention, to paint writers in French and English as ‘determinists’. Yet he makes few other arguments that really illustrate the key points of difference. Here, we need to look separately at treatments of the francophone and anglophone traditions.

Apart from the ‘futurists’, Mumford is the sole representative of the anglophone tradition. *Technics and Civilization* (Mumford’s only work referred to in the paper) was published in the mid-1930s, at the same time as Ortega was publishing his key work on technology. Comparisons would be interesting, but here rest heavily on the charge that

Mumford was a determinist. Particularly in this early work of his, the charge may well be prosecuted, but it is unfortunate that the author does not even give a page reference to where Mumford's determinism is to be found. Still, with this limited field of comparison, Spanish possibilism does seem to offer an alternative to the works in English.

The French tradition presents a greater challenge to the thesis of Spanish exceptionalism. The one sentence that deals with this challenge is hard to understand and concise to the point of being telegraphic (p. 3). Simondon, Leroi-Gourhan, and Stiegler are name-checked here, with an admission that they may have understood 'technique as constitutive of an open human reality' (in common with the Spanish tradition). There follows a confusing comment on 'critical reflections', referring to Mumford and Ellul. The French writers, and particularly Simondon and Stiegler, deserve far more attention if the author is to make his case for a distinct Spanish tradition (see 'Further reading', below). I allow a lot of leeway for an article as brief as this one – brevity is a virtue! – but there needs to be more evidence to support this aspect of the author's thesis.

In conclusion, I reiterate my appreciation for the brief exposition of this Spanish tradition, while pointing out that the demonstration of its uniqueness may have been oversold. Even without tracing Broncano's bibliographic or biographical debt to Ortega, an outline of a 'tradition' has been made. It is a tradition of which anglophones are far too ignorant, and I thank the author for bringing it to our attention. I have enjoyed the opportunity, afforded by this article, to learn something of the contributions of these two thinkers. In this spirit, I add some references (rather than specific citations) to broaden the scope for reading into diverse traditions of thinking about technology, culture, and being human.

Further reading: other relevant work, in addition to that cited by Prof. Monterroza-Ríos.

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