

Abstract

Transhumanism: A Progressive Vision of the Future or Liberal Capitalism's Last Ideological Resort? †

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† Presented at the IS4SI 2017 Summit DIGITALISATION FOR A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY, Gothenburg, Sweden, 12–16 June 2017.

Published: 9 June 2017

As an organised socio-cultural movement that is becoming ever more politically active, transhumanism is something of a new phenomenon. It has its roots in those segments of US society in the 1970s and 1980s which—against the backdrop of wide-ranging expectations concerning the ‘Space Age’—blended ideas and habits taken from 1960s counter-culture with strong and in many cases quasi-religious hopes of a future society shaped by science-fictionesque high-tech [1,2]. While this early transhumanist movement already evolved within certain organisational structures (e.g., the *L5 Society* which advocated the colonisation of extra-terrestrial space), it was not until the 1990s that organisations emerged that were specifically dedicated to promoting transhumanism as an encompassing worldview. In the meantime we have witnessed a certain amount of organisational reshuffling within the movement, and more recently the emergence of (small) political organisations of transhumanists, including some (very small) national political parties.

If we are to adequately assess the current relevance of transhumanism, however, it would be short-sighted to look only at the organised movement in a narrow sense. It derives much of its current relevance from the fact that it is embedded within a much broader socio-cultural milieu; one that includes prominent representatives of digital capitalism. The proximity to transhumanism displayed by influential networks in the US innovation system has been pointed out in policy-oriented and ethical discourses on various fields of science and technology (such as nanotechnology) for quite some time now. Since the late 2000s, however, we have witnessed more widespread public interest in the question of the extent to which transhumanism plays a role in the visions of the future, or even in the short-term business strategies of key players in digital capitalism. As such, transhumanism is often deemed a radical variant of what has been termed ‘Californian ideology’ [3,4].

The surge in public interest has entailed considerable mass media reporting (e.g., [5]), which in turn has aroused further political interest in this topic; we have also seen an increase in anarchist, socialist and ecologist critiques, for example in France [6] and Germany [7,8]. On the other hand, certain fashionable leftist schools of thought such as accelerationism have put forward notions of technology-driven progress and emancipation that closely resemble the transhumanist ones.

This brings us to another aspect of transhumanism, namely the fact that today's transhumanist movement is in many respects deeply indebted to thinkers in the last third of the nineteenth and the first third of the twentieth century. They developed genuinely transhumanist visions of the future [9], even in some technical detail. We would argue that this aspect is crucial to our discussion because the majority of these thinkers openly promoted socialist visions of the future. In particular J. Desmond Bernal's visions portray the creation of a socialist world society as the foundation for a much greater undertaking by humankind (a species that is increasingly cyborgised and transhuman), namely the conquest of extra-terrestrial space by a civilisation in which human intellect is embodied in technoscientific devices.

The present paper argues that any attempt to answer the question raised in the title of this workshop—whether transhumanism should be seen as a “proper guide to a posthuman condition” or deemed a “dangerous idea”—should begin by identifying the visions within which any future

society transhumanism is embedded. While much of discourse on transhumanism since the late 1990s has focused on a perceived dichotomy between a kind of largely US transhumanism that is (ultra-)liberal and individualist on the one hand and various anti-individualist (conservative, ecologist or socialist) critiques of transhumanism on the other, a historical perspective may allow us to better understand the multi-faceted ideological character of transhumanism. As argued elsewhere [10], the increasing relevance of transhumanism in current discourse on science, technology and the future demonstrates that global players in today's digital capitalism still follow an agenda which was developed in Britain in the heyday of imperialism and after the Great War as a reaction to a perceived crisis in progressive thinking and as a contribution to the establishment of technoscience in society.

Notwithstanding its focus on individual choices, the ideological foundations of current transhumanism are thus collectivistic. By dint of its largely quasi-religious character, transhumanism could and can feature in politically quite distinct projects, such as British imperialism, scientific communism and 'digital capitalism'; as an ideology for technoscience, current transhumanism still expresses a belief in a grand narrative about the future of humankind in which technoscience is portrayed as a means of salvation.

In light of the strange fact that the transhumanist grand narrative about the future has fascinated and continues to fascinate representatives of a wide variety of political persuasions, it appears advisable to analyse how desirable transhumanism actually is against the backdrop of different societal visions and political stances evident in the history of transhumanism. With a view to the above-mentioned current political discussions about the role played by transhumanism in our 'digital age', we may then ask first whether transhumanism provides us with a progressive vision of the (distant) future of our species, or whether it should be better deemed liberal capitalism's last ideological resort, competing with nationalist and (openly) religious ideologies. More specific questions about the desirability of transhumanism can be raised on the basis of such an analysis, for example concerning the potential consequences its rise might have for the goal of creating a sustainable global society.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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