

Review - Brzezinski's Technetronic Era

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Review - Brzezinski's Technetronic Era

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/07/22/review-between-two-ages-america%e2%80%99s-role-in-the-technetronic-era/>

STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, JUL 22 2011

Various things have been said and written about this long out of print book by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the well known academic, co-Founder of the Trilateral Commission, and former National Security Adviser to Jimmy Carter. The extremely candid nature of the book's prose, the statements it makes throughout, and the fact that it has been out of print since 1982 – despite the popularity of the author – have led to internet conspiracies galore. A simple internet search will reward an interested reader further on the aforementioned, which usually revolves around the promise that the book yields insights into shadowy-elite philosophizing for a dystopic future world order.

The book *is* a fascinating, yet highly dated glimpse of what *might* be called elitist philosophy. Yet the majority of the excitement that the overpriced used copies in circulation generate is not fully warranted, although the book is certainly one of the most curious I have personally come across from a noted academic/politician.

The version cited is the reprint by Greenwood Press (December 20, 1982). Page numbers are in parenthesis.

The Technetronic age is that which is created by the (theoretical) Technetronic Revolution. It is always fairly ambiguously presented as to whether Brzezinski is actually predicting this revolution based on observation/trends, or whether he is abstractly philosophizing. It certainly is not a work of political science. With this in mind, his concluding line in the book, 'In the technetronic era, philosophy and politics will be crucial' serve to confuse the reader further rather than give some closure.

So, what is the book all about? The Technetronic Revolution is described as the imminent third revolution in society following the agrarian and then industrial revolutions. The Technetronic era is, 'a society that is shaped culturally, psychologically, socially and economically by the impact of technology and electronics – particularly in the arena of computers and electronics.' (9) The Technetronic Era is therefore for Brzezinski an age beyond that of the industrial age and industrial capitalism. Talent becomes the new power: Intelligence, technological innovation and progress dwarf social status and prestige. This revolution takes place at a time when mankind is growing more unified due to common perceptions of ethics and liberty, yet also more fragmented due to the Cold War – thereby creating the friction within which change will occur.

So, how will life be in the Technetronic era? Brzezinski wastes no time in painting the picture for us in a seemingly youthful technological burst of enthusiasm: All aspects of life are influenced and controlled by computerized databases and scientific intervention; 'the increasing availability of biochemical means of human control augment the political scope of consciously chosen direction, and thereby also the pressures to direct, to choose, and to change.' (10) Further 'In the Technetronic society the trend seems to be toward aggregating the individual support of millions of unorganized citizens, who are easily within the reach of magnetic and attractive personalities, and effectively exploiting the latest communication techniques to manipulate emotion and control reason.' (13) 'In addition, it may be possible – and tempting – to exploit for strategic-political purposes the fruits of research on the brain and on human behaviour.' (57)

So, considering the array of statements above, not only do the scientific, technologically stimulated, elite decide the political direction by outward manipulation of politics using extreme propaganda, but there is an additional subversive manipulation of the public through what could be construed as genetic manipulation and/or brainwashing. It can even

Review - Brzezinski's Technetronic Era

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

be quite reasonably related to the current generation of politics and politicians brought into consciousness in the modern era and the age of 'spin' and style over substance.

The result of the processes mentioned above on any individual resident in the Technetronic era is that they become 'changed human beings' (16) remoulded from their natural state to become citizens of this new scientific age. With mankind's advances in science and technology therefore, it is perfectly feasible for Brzezinski to prescribe the need for biological matter to be developed to fit the world created. This fits in with Marx, for example, who supposed mankind was malleable and perfectible. The difference is that Marx hypothesised that mankind would find perfection in the artificially created communist state, not in what appears to be a scientific dictatorship. Brzezinski expresses a notable admiration for Marx, devoting a substantial chunk of the book to commentary on the communist question. It would seem logical to assume that Brzezinski was somehow attempting to modernise elements of Socialist doctrine to accommodate the advances society has made in the years since Marx wrote.

Brzezinski hails socialism (as applied in the Western world, not in the USSR) as a Janus faced beast caught in a paradox; it could be a threat due to 1) fragmentation without it, or 2) be the root of excessive state control over its citizens. Socialism for Brzezinski has been directionless and the In essence, it seems that the Technetronic revolution will enable the scientific elite to steer the society effectively without the meddlesome presence of such drawbacks as workers unions and diversity of thought and action. 'The active shaping of the future passes into the hands of a socially somewhat conservative but technologically innovative elite.' (248) Imagine a society operating like NASA on a space mission...focused, determined and highly specialised guided by a hierarchical control structure. Hence, with the large chunk of the book devoted to what they call the dreaded 'S' word in America, it is not surprising that by the time Jimmy Carter went on the campaign trail, the book had dropped out of print – only to be reprinted one last time in 1982 following Brzezinski's departure from office after Carter was defeated by Reagan.

In another interesting section, Brzezinski professes elegantly that a 'planetary consciousness' is developing; the nations of Earth are uniting for reasons of collective strength, such as in Europe. This process is exacerbated and possibly caused by the strength and dominance of the USA. Rivals want to compete with America, but can only do so by working together. This will cause an eventual union of man as the class of 'Transnational Elites' who are 'highly internationalist or globalist in spirit and outlook' network the world together. (59) This is similar to the so-called New World Order that entered the academic literature some years later in the form of neo-liberalism encompassing the globe based on the mutual acceptance of the global marketplace and transnational corporations etc.. Hence, although this was written originally in 1970/71, it is intriguing both within, and outside of, its context.

Moving firmly back into the book's context, Brzezinski acknowledges that the USA was in a deep cultural malaise in the early 70s, noting that it has only been able to survive intact as its success has 'obscured its social blemishes' (198). Of course, at the time of writing with Vietnam at a height, and the social protests of the 1960's still raw, his focus is perhaps unavoidable. Despite the internal social problems, the USA is where the Technetronic revolution was beginning, in the new frontier industries of science and technology based in America's cutting age infrastructure. As ever, what happens in America happens in the world, and Brzezinski maintains that the Technetronic revolution will export automatically on this premise.

A large deal of the conspiratorial fervour over the book is related to the following passage – *with my emphases in brackets* showing how the statement has been interpreted by conspiracy theorists in the post-2001 world:

'Persisting social crisis (terrorism), the emergence of a dramatic personality, (Osama bin Laden) and the exploitation of mass media to obtain public confidence would be the stepping stones in the piecemeal transformation of the United States into a highly controlled society (the War on Terror/Patriot Act etc..)' (253)

Now, it is easy to see how those words lean heavily to the conspiratorial mind. That being said, the passage is clearly written as a warning of the dangers of the type of development a Technetronic revolution *could* bring – and therefore the attention generated is usually due to the passage being taken out of context.

The Technetronic revolution is *not*, contrary to wide belief, a prescription for some kind of revolutionary stateless

Review - Brzezinski's Technetronic Era

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

world, or one world order devoid of the much-maligned international anarchy that IR classrooms and ivory tower dwellers discuss daily. Rather, it is a recipe for a conglomerate of individual devolved units comprising of elements of developed nations (the scientific elite within those nations) who have ascended through their own triumph in technology and innovation to Technetronic status. The poorer areas of the Earth are presumably left out of the equation... in fact the third world is dubbed the victim of the technetronic revolution by Brzezinski. All in all, taken as a 40 year old idea that has not been in print for 30 years (I will leave that for others to assume why) it is more than of passing interest when viewing the 21st Century world we live in today. The phrase 'Technetronic Era' many not have cemented its place in posterity – despite the subsequent fame of the author a few years after he coined the phrase – but we appear to be living in elements of it nonetheless.

About the author:

Dr Stephen McGlinchey is the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of E-International Relations and Senior Lecturer of International Relations at UWE Bristol. His publications include *Foundations of International Relations* (Bloomsbury 2022), *International Relations* (2017), *International Relations Theory* (2017) and *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran* (Routledge 2021, 2014). You can find him on twitter @mcglincheyst or LinkedIn.