

**A New Frontier for Liberation Theology?
A Critical, Theological Investigation of Attention Colonisation in
Advanced Technological Societies**

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Abstract

Recent academic and popular discourse has understood the personal and social costs from increasingly powerful and persuasive technologies in terms of abuse, colonisation and oppression. Albert Borgmann also argues there is a concealed form of *captivity and deprivation* among technological citizens which he calls advanced poverty. Despite a wide recognition of suffering and exploitation amidst increasing human/technological imbrication, liberation theology has given no serious attention to oppression/emancipation within a culture of technology. Technology, however, is not simply privileged means for pursuing the promises of modernity, it carries the mark of capitalism and a distinct way of taking up the world. Today, emerging asymmetries of knowledge and power prompt a consideration of predatory persuasive technologies, the complicity of all techno-citizens and the opportunities for freedom in this context.

This project is interested to understand whether captivity and deprivation within a culture of technology is credible and recognisable today. Could persons in anything like ‘advanced poverty’ be a *locus theologicus* in the liberationist tradition? I broadly conclude that *attention colonisation* amidst *techno-capitalistic escalation* is a real form of injury, an ongoing suffering or oppression, deserving of theology’s consideration. These intensifying conditions require resistance/reform within the designs and uses of devices, as well as practices of voluntary poverty or re-burdenment which have the effect of retarding escalation, opening spaces for rewilding in the technosystem and lowering us back down to earth, where the significance of vulnerable persons and things is rediscovered and celebrated. A liberation theology of technology is necessary for persons enduring emerging forms of oppression and colonisation in an increasingly technified world.

Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Scott completed his Master of Theological Studies at the Franciscan School of Theology (FST) at the University of San Diego in 2016. Under the tutelage of John Kiesler, OFM, in both his intercultural and liberation theology courses, Scott was challenged to explore how theology can speak to persons in *this* time. A special reading course in the work of philosopher of technology, Albert Borgmann, sowed the seeds for this thesis, which is to consider how the profound resources of Latin American liberation theology might address persons in oppressive emerging conditions of an advanced technological society. Scott's master's thesis began his research journey along these lines. Joseph Chinnici, OFM, president emeritus and professor of history at FST, having completed his doctorate at the University of Oxford, encouraged Scott to consider pursuing his PhD in the UK and was instrumental in his support.

Prior to his graduate studies, Scott spent more than ten years in business management in Southern California. It was during this time that he witnessed, up close, people across socio-economic levels struggling toward the elusive 'American Dream,' whilst immersed in an accelerating pace of life. Scott also has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Intercultural Studies, with a Minor in Biblical Studies, completed in 2003. He has worked with an international non-profit organisation in the Philippines and Mexico and has spent time studying and working in Connemara, Ireland and Buenos Aires, Argentina.

To my wife Erin and daughters, Rachel, Catherine and Agnes

Chapter 1

Introduction

Radical and emancipatory language has emerged in our contemporary technological context—across both academic and popular discourse. Philosopher James Williams, in his book *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*, writes, “The liberation of human attention may be the defining moral and political struggle of our time.”¹ Bernard Stiegler, in *The Age of Disruption*, speaks of “the systematic exploitation”² brought on by a ‘new kind of barbarism’ in computational capitalism. Media theorist and popular intellectual, Douglas Rushkoff, published a manifesto opposing an ongoing “agenda embedded in our technology, our markets, and our major cultural institutions...[that] has turned them from forces for human connection and expression into ones of isolation and repression.”³ Shoshana Zuboff in her much discussed, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, concludes by saying, “The Berlin Wall fell for many reasons, but above all it was because the people of East Berlin said, ‘No more!’...Let this be *our* declaration.”⁴ Journalist and activist, Paul Mason’s book, *Clear Bright Future: A Radical Defence of the Human Being* includes this final line in the publisher’s abstract: “[Mason] offers a vision of humans as more than puppets, customers or cogs in a machine. This work of radical optimism asks: Do you want to be controlled? Or do you want something better?”⁵ That there exists considerable contemporary conversation (including reflected in

¹ James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), xii.

² Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 7.

³ Douglas Rushkoff, *Team Human* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019), 3.

⁴ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019), 525.

⁵ Paul Mason, *Clear Bright Future: A Radical Defence of the Human Being* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), copy cover.

television/film⁶, and music⁷) attempting to express and understand consequential harms to persons amidst present technological advancement, as well as hopeful remediation (even liberation) for these conditions, hardly needs establishing—it is near ubiquitous today.

Such emancipatory framing and an emphasis on repression or suffering, in this age of technology, has not resulted, to date, in any robust recovery of liberation theology for such a context. On one level, this is surprising given similar concerns and formulation of the issues (i.e., of liberation, oppression, concerns for forms of erasure and particular assertions for human value or dignity) which have been emphasised in liberation theology. On the other hand, a liberation theology of technology sounds peculiar for at least two reasons. First, liberation, it could be argued, is precisely what technologies help to provide. From penicillin, contraceptives, aircraft and the internet, technologies have been a means for disburdenment and enrichment.⁸ Wouldn't a liberation theology of technology, by definition, be somehow reactionary and regressive? Second, classic Latin American liberation theology centralised a concern for the poor. Advanced technological societies, however, are broadly marked by their affluence. Would this not be, then, a "liberation" project for the privileged, and in that way, a perversion of the original endeavour of liberation theology? What could liberation look like for such citizens, what

⁶ For recent examples, see: *The Social Dilemma*, directed by Jeff Orlowski (Exposure Labs, 9 Sept. 2020), <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=social%20dilemma&jbv=81254224>; *Off the Hook*, created by Marie Jardillier (Netflix, 1 Sept. 2022) <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=off%20the%20hook&jbv=81423343>; *Kimi*, directed by Steven Soderbergh (New Line Cinema, 10 Feb. 2022), <https://hbomax.fandom.com/wiki/KIMI>; *Screened Out*, directed by Jon Hyatt (Hyatt Bros Films, 2020), https://www.amazon.co.uk/Screened-Out-Jon-Hyatt/dp/B087YP3WWJ/ref=sr_1_1?crd=1B5RGS9D26HPV&keywords=screened+out&qid=1671813063&prefix=screened+out+%2Caps%2C89&sr=8-1; *Black Mirror*, series, created by Charlie Brooker (House of Tomorrow, 2011-2019), <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186674?trackId=255824129>.

⁷ For recent examples, see: "Children of the Internet" on *12 Questions* by Future Utopia, Dave, Es Devlin (Future Utopia and Kobalt Music Publishing, 23 Oct. 2020); "Total Entertainment Forever" on *Pure Comedy* by Father John Misty (Sub Pop Records, 7 Apr. 2017); "Smash the Machine" on *The Organic Band* by Babe Rainbow (Eureka Music, 14 Oct. 2022); "TSLAMP" (Time Spent Looking at My Phone) on *Little Dark Age* by MGMT (Columbia Records 9 Feb. 2018); or *Our Pathetic Age* by DJ Shadow's (Mass Appeal/Reconstruction Productions, 15 Nov. 2019).

⁸ Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 36.

is it *from* precisely, and what is it *for*? There are ironies and seeming incongruities, in the very term liberation theology of technology that should be acknowledged.

However, philosopher of technology, Albert Borgmann, has argued that there is a concealed form of captivity and deprivation among citizens of advanced technological societies which he ultimately calls ‘advanced poverty.’ This ‘advanced poverty’ he distinguishes from ‘brute poverty.’ Brute poverty is the cruel and unnecessary condition of material deprivation and suffering that exists despite the technological means to address it.⁹ ‘Advanced poverty,’ is however, the “impoverishment of life in the most advanced technological setting” and reflects a “peculiar vacuity and superficiality of modern life.”¹⁰ One feature of advanced poverty emerges in relation to the brutally poor. Borgmann describes this as the “the unquestionable comfort and security that has all but paralyzed our capacity to help *and to be helped* and so to have part in the fullness of life.”¹¹ This is a captivity and deprivation which is not only reflective of individual choice (or complicity), but also conditioned by a larger technological way of life. Borgmann seems to be arguing both global injustice *and* a kind of impoverished state among affluent technological citizens are related through the very ongoing shape of contemporary technology itself.

Given recent academic and popular discourse which has framed contemporary problems for persons in a technological culture in distinctly emancipatory terms, and Borgmann’s provocative argument that the affluent of this culture are in a state of advanced poverty—of a kind of captivity and deprivation—I am interested to understand how (or whether) classic Latin American liberation theology is of any meaningful relevance here. That is, are conditions within a present age of technology such that a

⁹ Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bravos Press, 2003), 104.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

liberation theology of technology is necessary, and does early Latin American liberation theology provide important insights or meaning for the technological citizen today?¹²

Research Aim and Questions

It is the overall aim of my thesis, then, to test the feasibility for the beginnings of a liberation theology of technology. I am enquiring whether the condition of ‘advanced poverty’ Borgmann describes is in any way credible or recognizable today. And if ‘advanced poverty’ is not an accurate or helpful term, how should harmful and oppressive aspects of a contemporary culture of technology be characterised? Second, and following on from this, I seek to understand how or whether classic Latin American liberation theology, through the work of its foremost architect, Gustavo Gutiérrez, could be meaningfully extended to these persons. In other words, could persons in anything like ‘advanced poverty’ today be themselves a *locus theologicus* in the liberationist tradition? And perhaps most critically, if emancipation should be extended to something like advanced poverty, what is liberation from and for?

Method as Unity within Liberation Theologies

As the overall aim of this thesis is to test the feasibility for the beginnings of a liberation theology of technology, I have chosen to follow the method of liberation theology, where that is viable. One could ask, which method, as there has been an expanding proliferation of liberation theologies (e.g., Black, Feminist, Womanist, *Minjung*, *Mujerista*, Queer) and Latin American liberation theology, itself, is not (and has never been) a monolith. Peter Phan, in his article “Method in Liberation Theologies” argues that

¹² This study has chosen to limit itself to early Latin American liberation theology. In addition to its influential and foundational method (which I now discuss), I am also interested in its fundamental concern with poverty—both its meanings and role in orienting the Christian life. As Borgmann is identifying a poverty (advanced poverty) in the midst of technological affluence, I am interested to test such a notion with the understandings of early Latin American liberation theology, which was eminently concerned for those poor understood to be suffering on the underside of history and outside the privileges of modernity.

in “the rich and even bewildering tapestry of liberation theologies...[the] unifying thread...is methodological.”¹³ And while Phan, as we will see, shows adaptations to the method that reflect the religious, social and cultural backgrounds of other and emerging contexts, he nevertheless sees early Latin American liberation theological method as the basic approach which unifies the myriad of liberation theologies.¹⁴ This was a point of agreement among early Latin American liberation theologians, themselves. Gutiérrez says that “the theology of liberation offers us not so much a new theme for reflection as a *new way to do theology*.”¹⁵ Juan Luis Segundo emphasises that “the one and only thing that can maintain the liberative character of any theology is not its content but its methodology.”¹⁶ And outside of Latin America, in agreement with Phan, Peter Scott believes that liberation theology’s “international influence is associated with its method.”¹⁷

It is important to note, however, the existence of tensions over the broader exportation of liberation theology. These are less focused on method, precisely, and more on what Mario Aguilar describes as “the globalization of liberation theology and the possibility that the social contexts of the poor could change and in fact do change geographically and in time.”¹⁸ Here, among some liberation theologians, the concern is not simply that Latin American liberation theology becomes decontextualised and transformed into a theological commodity, but rather for how to understand liberation

¹³ Peter C. Phan, “Method in Liberation Theologies,” *Theological Studies* 61, no. 1 (2000): 62.

¹⁴ Phan does not argue, however, that such a myriad of liberation theologies would all understand Latin American liberation theology as their necessary progenitor (in method or otherwise). Indeed, James Cone’s work appears to have arisen concurrently with liberationist work in Latin America.

¹⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Liberation of Theology: History, Politics, and Salvation*, rev. ed. and trans. Caridad Inda, John Eagleson, and Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 12.

¹⁶ Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1977), 39-40.

¹⁷ Peter Manley Scott, “Introduction” to Section III “Kingdom Come” in *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh, Jeffery W. Bailey, and Craig Hovey (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 164.

¹⁸ Mario I. Aguilar, “Liberation Theology 2: Developments and Reception,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 297.

theology after the fall of socialism and shifts in the contexts for liberation theology.¹⁹ For example, when historical praxis did not develop along certain lines, and conditions became worse for the poor in Latin America, former Nicaraguan Sandinista and priest, Ernesto Cardenal, would lament, “[L]iberation theology is in crisis. Capitalism won. Period. What more can be said?”²⁰ This brings to the fore *a preferential option of the poor*, its meaning and opportunities/limitations for expansion, as well as larger implicated socio-economic systems, including their role in oppression. This is a crucial area this project takes up in considerable detail, beginning in Chapter 6.

Despite these tensions, it is also clear that many of the foremost Latin American liberation theologians saw the importance of their work, especially that of Gutiérrez, as *globally meaningful*. Leonardo Boff, in “The Originality of the Theology of Liberation,” wrote, “The importance of Gustavo Gutiérrez transcends the borders of Latin America because what he has created possesses a universal theological significance...He has opened up a new and promising path for theological thinking; he has invented a new way of doing theology.”²¹ I will return to methodology, but, to address a larger endeavour of this thesis, which is indeed to eventually seek theological meanings from a Latin American context, I believe much can be learned from how Gutiérrez approached the work of sixteenth-century Spanish priest and reformer, Bartolomé de Las Casas, for his book *Las Casas*. Gutiérrez writes,

We have no intention of positing facile equations between eras endowed each with its own coordinates and personality. But neither must we fail to perceive the points of contact between them or the teachings that we can gather from the past. The present acquires density and substance when it is

¹⁹ Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology an Argument and Manifesto* (Milton Park, England: Routledge, 2016), 2-18.

²⁰ Miguel A. De La Torre, “Liberation Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 41.

²¹ Leonardo Boff, “The Originality of the Theology of Liberation,” in *Expanding the View: Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Future of Liberation Theology*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 47.

nourished by the memory of a journey, when the courage is found to identify unsolved problems and wounds not yet healed... This has its risks, of course, and consequently must be done with great respect.²²

Following a methodology, as well as a search for meanings, from a location which has suffered historic oppression from a Northern context that has perpetuated many of the same oppressions, should only be performed carefully. Robert McAfee Brown is aware of this when he writes, in “Reflections of a North American,” that “the task is rather to discover where our own areas of need for liberation are located, and begin to create a liberation theology for North America.”²³ Gutiérrez concurs that theology begins from the ground up, and asking questions against a horizon for liberation is the work of theologians in all places. He says, “From pastoral questions, from practical questions, we get new theologies.”²⁴ Let us turn to outlining the method from Latin American liberation theology, before interacting with this method to mark deviations for my project.

Outlining the Method

The horizon toward which liberation theology is drawn is “the liberating transformation of the history of humankind and also therefore that part of humankind—gathered into *ecclesia*—which openly confesses Christ.”²⁵ This lends liberation theology an openness, even as it envisions an eventual outcome. That is, it is “always *in via*, under construction,”²⁶ as liberation is sought in new and emerging contexts, working toward a larger eventuality, the Reign of God in fullness.

Gutiérrez summarises the method, saying,

²² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, trans. Robert R. Barr, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 457.

²³ Robert McAfee Brown, “Reflections of a North American: The Future of Liberation Theology,” in *Expanding the View: Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Future of Liberation Theology*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 198.

²⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Liberation Theology for the Twenty-First Century,” in *Romero’s Legacy: The Call to Peace and Justice*, ed. Pilar Hogan Closkey and John P. Hogan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 46.

²⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., 12.

²⁶ Phan, “Method in Liberation Theologies,” 60.

From the beginning, the theology of liberation posited that the first act is involvement in the liberation process, and that theology comes afterward, as a second act. The theological moment is one of critical reflection from within, and upon, concrete historical praxis, in confrontation with the word of the Lord as lived and accepted in faith—a faith that comes to us through manifold, and sometimes ambiguous, historical mediations, but which we are daily remaking and repairing.²⁷

The *first act* or moment sees the theologian as already “organically linked to the popular undertaking of liberation.”²⁸ This reflects both a level of experience of the concrete conditions of oppression, as well as commitment with those persons actively working toward liberation. Clodovis Boff distinguishes between various levels of immersion within these communities (i.e., restricted involvement, alternate periods, and joining full-time).²⁹ But to speak generally, this starting point for theology is the actual conditions of suffering, and not from abstract ideas or themes such as ‘justice’ or even ‘liberation.’³⁰

Before moving to the second step, I want to note that beginning in the 1980s, including in an important essay titled “Theology and the Social Sciences,” Gutiérrez developed his understanding of praxis in step one to include a greater emphasis on contemplation/silence.³¹ This is what Michael E. Lee calls liberation theology’s “mystico-prophetic turn.”³² The ethical and prophetic nature of step one now takes on a dimension of gratitude for God’s goodness and love, which will then inform the emphasis on

²⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Select Writings*, trans. Robert R. Barr (London: SCM, 1983), 200.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 212.

²⁹ Clodovis Boff, “Epistemology and Method of the Theology of Liberation,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, eds. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 74.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

³¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 55-58.

³² Michael E. Lee, “Gustavo Gutiérrez and Latin American Liberation Theology,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology*, ed. Rubén Rosario Rodríguez (London: Bloomsburg Publishing, 2020), 249.

reasoning in step two. The character of this contemplation is most developed in his book *On Job*,³³ and will be a theme which arises in the course of this research.

In *step two*, theology follows the awareness, experience and commitment of step one. It is now “a critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the Word.”³⁴ Cleodovis Boff in “Epistemology and Method of the Theology of Liberation” in *Mysterium Liberationis* and in *Introducing Liberation Theology*, with his brother Leonardo Boff, describes three mediations, that are involved in step two. Boff’s mediations clarify and develop elements which are found in Gutiérrez and coincide with the pastoral method of *seeing, judging, and acting*.

Boff correlates ‘seeing’ to the socioanalytic mediation, which, “seeks to understand why the oppressed are oppressed.”³⁵ Originally, and often, this was to utilise what Boff calls Marxist “methodological indications,” including attention to class struggle and the power of (religious) ideologies.³⁶ There was also a clear concern with Neoplatonic (theology as wisdom) and Aristotelean (theology as rational knowledge) philosophies,³⁷ as these were too abstract (that is, removed from concrete conditions/historical praxis) and reinforced a kind of ‘pure’ theology centralised in established and ‘authoritative’ centres. While Segundo would insist on dialogue with, in particular, the social sciences and the socio-economic lines of analysis, Gutiérrez, in accepting a former over-reliance on, in particular, dependency theory, would advocate for a widening of the analytic scope. He acknowledged the use of psychology, ethnology, and anthropology, and said, “attention to cultural factors will help us to enter into the mentalities and basic attitudes that explain

³³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew O’Connell (1987; repr., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

³⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., 11.

³⁵ C. Boff, “Epistemology and Method,” 74.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 4-6.

important aspects of the reality with which we are faced.”³⁸ Here I believe philosophy, as such, is not the problem, rather there is need for sensitivity to or suspicion of the political interests of any explanatory lens. Scott turns this around, asking, “if no theory is ‘neutral,’ which master does theology serve?”³⁹ Phan sees, in this widening of the analytical scope, the use of, for example, psychological tools for introspection in Asian liberation theologies. Aloysius Pieris, Sri Lankan liberation theologian, has pointed to the importance, in his context, of “voluntary poverty” in addition to “imposed poverty.”⁴⁰ Phan also points out the added role for the tools of interreligious dialogue, inculturation, as well as listening and reflecting on stories from the oppressed (e.g., Korean *Minjung* theology).⁴¹ While, an early and important priority was placed on certain socioanalytical tools, the bottom line concern is always, again, “Why is there oppression and what is its causes?”⁴² These insights become “raw material” for theology.⁴³

The second (‘judging’) mediation is the *hermeneutic mediation*. The Bible and tradition are interrogated to understand what God has to say in light of the conditions and causes discovered. Here, “the liberation theologian goes to the scriptures bearing the whole weight of the problems, sorrows, and hopes of the poor, seeking light and inspiration from the divine word.”⁴⁴ The third mediation (‘acting’) is *practical mediation* which circles theology back to praxis/orthopraxis, which is concrete “action for justice, to the deed of love, to conversion, to church renewal, to the transformation of society.”⁴⁵

³⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., xxiv-xxv.

³⁹ Scott, “Introduction” to “Kingdom Come,” 164.

⁴⁰ Phan, “Method in Liberation Theologies,” 47.

⁴¹ Phan, “Method in Liberation Theologies,” 62.

⁴² Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 25.

⁴³ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundation*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1987), 31.

⁴⁴ Boff and Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 32.

⁴⁵ C. Boff, “Epistemology and Method,” 83.

Finally, for our recounting of the method of liberation theology, a broader point about the role of the theologian. When reading, in particular Clodovis Boff (but also Segundo), it is clear there is an interest to present, through the socioanalytical mediation, a distinctly rational uncovering of oppression. The socio-economic thrust, in liberation theology, provides the necessary ‘facts’ or ‘science’ that works against ideology—religious and otherwise. There is, however, for Boff, also a creative or artistic dimension for the theologian, which should not be overlooked. Being intimately interwoven at the grassroots of suffering, he says, “the liberation theologian should possess in a high degree the art of connecting. He or she must connect the discourse of society, that of the world of popular significations, with the discourse of faith and the great tradition of the church.”⁴⁶ Boff also writes, in a section titled “Creative Work of Theology,” that “armed with the mediations they require, and with all the material accumulated through these mediations, liberation theologians now address the construction of genuinely new syntheses of faith and the production of new theoretical significations, with a view to meeting the great challenges of today.”⁴⁷ Here the theologian is creatively engaging with less realised connections between society and theology. New creative connections, it would seem, carry both a risk (as in, is this meaningful and does it hold?) as well an opportunity to introduce contemporary persons to meanings which were previously not assumed relevant or available.

Adapting the Method

I have chosen to follow the general method of liberation theology, making certain necessary adaptations, which I will now note. It should be recognised, first, that there are,

⁴⁶ C. Boff, “Epistemology and Method,” 71.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

indeed, other models for contextual theology.⁴⁸ In addition to its strong alternative epistemological basis, I have chosen liberation theology (or what Bevans would call the praxis model)⁴⁹ because of its emphasis on social change, practice, as well as its concern for liberation—a theme which, explored at the outset, I am keen to explore in an age of advanced technology. As I originate from one of the world’s most rampantly capitalistic and technologically forward-looking places (California) and researching from within the United Kingdom, I am sensitive to concerns for the exportation or bastardisation of liberation theology, away from its original setting and centre for concern (i.e., those in material destitution). But, to pick up Gutiérrez’ approach to Las Casas, it will be the goal and intention of this work to “perceive points of contact...that we can gather,” both in the use of the method of liberation theology, but also in considering its great themes (i.e., the poor and liberation). If Borgmann is correct in his notion that the shape of our culture of technology inhibits its citizens from meaningful engagement with those most suffering, then we are also keeping in mind Gutiérrez’ interest, in taking up Las Casas, “to identify unsolved problems and wounds not yet healed.” In this case, the very poor in Gutiérrez’ midst.

As a North Atlantic researcher, in light of Boff’s three degrees of contact, I am, most certainly, joined with the “popular milieus”⁵⁰ that I am concerned. There is not, however, a popular liberation movement today, in any political sense, and the hiddenness of any ‘captivity and deprivation’ will need to be investigated closely. In terms of the socioanalytic mediation for this task, I have certainly taken advantage of the widening of the analytic scope to consider the broader matters of the attention economy and

⁴⁸ See for example: Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

⁴⁹ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 70-87.

⁵⁰ C. Boff, “Epistemology and Method,” 74.

surveillance capitalism (Chapter 2) through lenses of history, social psychology, economics, philosophy, and technology studies. Our most acute analytical work (performed in Chapters 3-5), is done with scholars (Borgmann and Andrew Feenberg) from within philosophy of technology. I provide a lengthy explanation for my use of philosophy at the outset of Chapter 3.

The results of this socioanalytic mediation are then brought into engagement with Gutiérrez in what is a limited or modified hermeneutic mediation. There are two reasons for this theological focus on Gutiérrez. First, as my overall aim is to investigate the feasibility of a liberation theology of technology, I am interested to inform or confront any such ‘advanced poverty’ (and the wider understanding of its causes) with Gutiérrez’ perspective of Latin American material destitution, oppression and marginalisation, and, importantly, God’s privileging or preferential option for these persons. Second, beyond simply testing feasibility, this project is concerned to locate meaning for the technological citizen. If there is a fundamental impoverished condition in the midst of technological affluence, how might the work of Gutiérrez (albeit written from a very distinct context) speak to those in this condition? What is the relationship between poverty and advanced poverty? In Chapters 6-7, I do analyse and critique Gutiérrez’ understanding of poverty (which he bases in scripture), as well as Borgmann’s view (from his more theological work, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology*), but this is done through comparing, contrasting and correlating between the chosen texts of my interlocutors. Certainly, in light of the results of this study, there may be a need for a fuller hermeneutic mediation (e.g., to interrogate scripture anew, in the light of this work) but this would be important future scholarship.

In terms of the third, practical mediation, my thesis, itself, would not be an occasion for this. But in keeping with the general thrust of liberation theology (and despite

any provisional nature of this work), I am concerned to keep the discussions, and any coalescing themes, pointed toward eventual concrete action and practice.

Structure of the Thesis

Following this general method, then, we begin in Part I (Chapters 2-5) with a critical investigation titled, “A View of Oppression in a Technological Age.” Then, in Part II (Chapters 6-8), titled “Theology of Human Condescension,” I attempt to apply the insights carried forward from Part I and develop a theological response in dialogue with the work of Gutiérrez. I will briefly outline the chapters:

In Chapter 2, I seek to move beyond Borgmann’s vague description of advanced poverty to test whether conditions of captivity and deprivation within a culture of technology are in any general sense, credible and recognisable today. I begin by determining which criteria should an injury, within a culture of technology, be identified for investigation. Over three substantial sections, we investigate: (1) the emergence of the attention economy (Tim Wu, Adam Alter), (2) James Williams framing of the attention economy in distinctly emancipatory terms, and (3), Shoshanna Zuboff’s argument for surveillance capitalism. I argue that the attention economy and surveillance capitalism can be understood under a larger and more helpful term for this project, *attention colonisation*.⁵¹ After determining whether this condition meets the criteria for our study, we conclude with a summary of questions and opportunities that are prompted for theology.

In Chapter 3, we will attempt to understand and situate attention colonisation within a broader theoretical framework. I begin by locating Borgmann and Feenberg in philosophy of technology, and I argue their relevance for liberation theology and this

⁵¹ Postcolonial theory and theology, as a distinct approaches, are addressed in the introductory pages of Chapter 2.

project. The majority of the chapter is a close analysis of the principal views of Borgmann, a chief interlocutor, including: the nature of our technological reality, key problems for the culture of technology, views of oppression/complicity/agency, and methods and entry for reform.

In Chapter 4, we will investigate the contrasting perspectives of Feenberg, using the same key categories, before analysing important similarities and distinctions between Feenberg and Borgmann.

In Chapter 5, we pause to draw together the findings from Chapters 2 through 4, and further clarify what, precisely, is being asked of theology. Here we are gathering understandings which will frame our theological inquiry in Gutiérrez for Part II of this thesis. Chapter 5 begins with a consideration of the contributions and limitations of both Borgmann and Feenberg for this project. I will then synthesise a view of technology and the larger problem for attention colonisation, which I refer to as *techno-capitalistic escalation*. I also determine, from liberation theology, which of its essential themes is most relevant for the conditions we have explored.

In Chapter 6, we begin the theological Part II. In Chapter 6, we will consider, in depth, what are Gutiérrez' conceptions of poverty and how his definitions have expanded in light of expanding liberationist movements. Second, we outline Borgmann's 'advanced poverty,' as preparation for an important comparative analysis of Gutiérrez and Borgmann's views of poverty in Chapter 7.

In Chapter 7, we will explore how, in light of both Gutiérrez and Borgmann, we can, for this project, understand poverty in the age of technology and whether forms of voluntary poverty could also play a role in remediating indifference, bitterness and distraction in an expanding culture of technology. We begin by understanding a fundamental incongruity in their visions of poverty. I will suggest a key for understanding

the relationship between their views. And finally, I will frame/map the earliest outlines of a larger conceptual device (which I call metapoverty).

Finally, in Chapter 8, beyond summarising our findings, I raise up key theological themes which this research has come to understand as critical, all of which, I argue, can be understood under a provisional heading of *a theology of human condescension or accommodation*. A theology of human condescension is an effort to unwind or devitalise escalating attention colonisation through purposeful re-burdenment and re-contextualisation. This will inevitably point toward necessary future work. I conclude by evaluating my title, original research questions and aim in light of the results of this study.

Locating this Project

I have, in large part, restricted my investigations of liberation theology to its most consequential and defining voice, Gustavo Gutiérrez, widely considered the ‘father’ of liberation theology.⁵² His book, *A Theology of Liberation*, is accepted as “a landmark, a quantum leap in Latin American theology.”⁵³ Scott refers to it as “the outstanding example”⁵⁴ of early work in liberation theology. Gutiérrez, more broadly, has provided a careful scaffolding and reference point for liberation theology, as Lee observes, “it would be difficult to identify a liberation theology that has not either dialogued or been inspired by his work.”⁵⁵

Principally in Chapter 7, I will explore why it would seem that Gutiérrez did not provide any serious reflection on technology, as well as the liability this poses. Pattison, in

⁵² Roberto S. Goizueta, “Liberation Theology I: Gustavo Gutiérrez,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 280.

⁵³ Roberto Oliveros, “History of Theology of Liberation,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, eds. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 17.

⁵⁴ Scott, “Introduction” to “Kingdom Come,” 163.

⁵⁵ Lee, “Latin American Liberation Theology,” 241.

his chapter “Theologies of Technology” in *Thinking about God in an Age of Technology*, acknowledges a wider dearth of twentieth-century work dedicated to the question of technology. He suggests that it is possible, among radical theologies, to “cull an extensive crop of throwaway remarks...but these generally fell far short of making technology as such a topic of sustained reflection.”⁵⁶

This is also the case with Gutiérrez. But, among those contemporaneous scholars that were taking up technology, there are key differences with the context and priorities of Gutiérrez in Latin America. Pattison points out many theologians in the North Atlantic who were engaging with technology in a substantive way, were often doing so amidst a greater embrace of secular society. These theologians and thinkers,⁵⁷ took what Pattison calls a “subordinationist” approach, which is to “subordinate technological thinking to a higher ‘wisdom’ to which theology or religious thinking has some kind of privileged access.”⁵⁸ Gutiérrez was not directly writing for a post-Christian society and his concern for grassroots, praxis-based theology would resist against subordination under a larger wisdom tradition in the same way. Also, Teilhard de Chardin⁵⁹ took an essentially positive view of contemporary science/technology, where “globalization is not primarily an economic or political phenomenon...but the self-realization of the biosphere as a single, complex consciousness-event.”⁶⁰ Gutiérrez, alternatively, is extremely sensitive to socio-economic consequences, included those from geopolitical colonisation. As we will later see, while Gutiérrez remains largely ambivalent or sanguine regarding technology, it is

⁵⁶ George Pattison, *Thinking About God in an Age of Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 38.

⁵⁷ For examples, see: Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan, 4th ed. (Norte Dame: University of Norte Dame Press, 1995); Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (London: SCM Press, 1935); and Paul Tillich, *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, ed. J. Mark Thomas (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988).

⁵⁸ Pattison, *Thinking About God*, 43.

⁵⁹ See for example: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, trans. Norman Denny (London: Collins Press, 1964).

⁶⁰ Pattison, *Thinking About God*, 41.

always a concern for oppressive powers and the technological means being held and advanced by the privileged that is of a more primary concern. Ellul,⁶¹ a counterpoint to Chardin, was much less optimistic that religion could shape or contribute to what he viewed as a totalising monolith that is contemporary technology.

Early liberation theologian, Rubem Alves, was influenced in a similar way, through Marcuse, to see technology (or technologism) as an oppressive power. I believe Alves is atypical in his interest as a liberation theologian here. Alves believed that technology had provided freedom, but that the freedom was subsequently annihilated by technology. He would argue that “only when man is free, as the subject of his history, is technology a necessary instrument, but nothing more than an instrument, for the creation of a society and of a tomorrow in which man finds new forms of human liberation and fulfilment.”⁶² As this study focuses on Gutiérrez, Latin American liberation theology’s most definitive founder, I will not be engaging Alves’s theology. Alves, indeed a pioneer in liberation theology, is perhaps more associated with liberative theopoetics, and would not have had access to contemporary thinking on technology (in particular the ‘empirical turn’ we will investigate). Also, Alves, while taking up technology and its effects for an ongoing way of life, I believe is limited by a view that technology could be retained as an instrument in the hands of a liberated subject. (This is explored in Chapter 3-5.) While Gutiérrez will not take up technology in the manner that his North Atlantic contemporaries did, he has retained, for this project, a crucial social and political theological focus, and a praxis-based method which sought to first see and understand concrete conditions for suffering in the theologian’s midst. Subordinating contemporary endeavours to prior or superior abstractions—whether those be of a wisdom tradition, a kind of evolutionary utopic end-

⁶¹ For examples see: Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965); and Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980).

⁶² Rubem A. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* (New York: Corpus Books, 1969), 27.

point, or totalising technology—would not be, I believe, grounded enough in the material realities of the poor (or in the empirical explanations for their poverty) he was foremost concerned.

Moving away from theologies of technology, to, in particular, political theologies of technology, Michael Burdett writes that “because relatively little theological work has been devoted to technology and technology is making a demonstrable impact on theology and politics today, there is considerable room for constructive work in this area.”⁶³ He suggests future work could include both practical and theoretical perspectives to assist the church to be “explicitly aware of how technology shapes its members and indeed all of creation.”⁶⁴ Also, future work could assist in “recognising how ends get embedded in the very structure of technology and its use” in order to understand how we can develop technology toward positive and significant ends. This interdisciplinary project attempts to make a contribution toward these existing gaps by bringing together two, hereto now, distinct strands. The first is the method and central concerns of Latin American liberation theology, including its starting place among those suffering. The second strand are tools of analysis (most critically, philosophy of technology) to inform a crucial gap in liberation theology,⁶⁵ that is to critically understand how such suffering is born up and shaped within an age of technology.

⁶³ Michael S. Burdett, “Technology and Information,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott, 2nd ed (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 554. Note: Burdett in his chapter identifies various strands leading to a political theology of technology today. Contemporary scholars include, for example: George Pattison, Peter Manley Scott, Michael Burdett and Brent Waters.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 554.

⁶⁵ It is worth noting that no author considering the ‘future of liberation theology,’ that I have reviewed, has indicated any ongoing work or opportunity for a liberation theology of technology. See for example: Carmelo E. Álvarez, “A Future for Latin American Liberation Theology?” in *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Stephen B. Bevans and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams (Cambridge, U.K.: James Clarke, 2012), 87-96; Gutiérrez, “Liberation Theology in the Twenty-First Century;” and Aguilar, “Liberation Theology 2.”

Conclusion

I have provided here a background for this study, the research aim and questions, an unpacking of this thesis' method, and a brief context in (political) theologies of technology in order to situate Gutiérrez, liberation theology, and the greater opening for this study. Locating, more precisely, the scholars I have chosen, occurs, in most cases, prior to engagement with their work (e.g., the introduction of Chapter 3 for philosophers of technology, Borgmann and Feenberg, as well as in Chapter 7, for a view of the distinct locations of Gutiérrez and Borgmann).

Let us now turn to Chapter 2, where I determine criteria for establishing injury or oppression within a culture of technology, and conduct an extensive look at what I will ultimately come to understand as attention colonisation.

Part I:

A View of Oppression in a Technological Age

Chapter 2

Attention Colonisation: ‘Captivity and Deprivation’ Today?

Albert Borgmann has suggested that there exists a new form of poverty, of captivity and deprivation, within our technological milieu. Whether Borgmann is helpful to consider any such conditions as *poverty* is certainly a matter to be investigated in Part II of this thesis. The task of this chapter, however, is to take up the basic outline of Borgmann’s argument, as has been framed in Chapter 1, and determine whether conditions of captivity and deprivation within a culture of technology are in any general sense, credible and recognisable today. Borgmann acknowledges his own limitations in this regard when he adds, “To grasp today’s poverty fundamentally we must uncover it, as urged before, in the typical circumstances of contemporary life. Here I can add nothing to the positive task beyond the hints already provided.”⁶⁶ To uncover such suffering or oppression within the quotidian aspects of contemporary life is not only to take up where Borgmann leaves off, but is also to cohere to the methodology of early Latin American liberation theology charted in Chapter 1.

This chapter will investigate what I ultimately term as *attention colonisation* through contemporary discourse on the attention economy and surveillance capitalism. It is relevant to ask, by which criteria should an injury, within a culture of technology, be selected for investigation? Certainly, there are numerous large-scale technologically-shaped concerns for human (and non-human) life: automation, military technologies, genome editing, and artificial general intelligence, to name just a few. There is also alarm for the effects of technological devices for face-to-face social connections, social media effects for mental health, and related public health risks from isolation and loneliness.

⁶⁶ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 107.

This project, however, has endeavoured to determine an injurious condition that achieves the following three criteria: first, that it represents a phenomenon that can be recognised as interwoven and implicated within a wide range of contemporary social/technological concerns. As this project is interested in a contextual, liberative theology for this present age of technology, we seek a fittingly fundamental and interrelated condition. Second, the injury should have identifiable actors which animate or exacerbate its growth. The phenomenon cannot suffer from a mystery of precise origins which lends itself to unhelpful abstraction and is incongruous with the history and method of classic liberation theology. Third, the injury should relate to a great number of citizens within an advanced technological society. As was just indicated, this project is exploring the feasibility of a liberative theology for persons within a contemporary advanced technological age. Here, the scope or parameters will not be limited to, for example, particular forms of minority disadvantage or inequality.⁶⁷ Rather, the context in question is decidedly broad, across, at least, advanced technological states of Europe and North America (perhaps most distilled within the United States). Therefore, the impact from any injury should be recognisable across such a wide scope.

To conclude the introduction to this chapter, I will briefly discuss the term *attention colonisation* and map the chapter's course. The central term here, *attention colonisation*, refers to sophisticated behavioural modification methods designed and employed by technologists and their corporate (and/or state) underwriters, which are intended to capture, maximise, and shape time *online* with a given device, platform, or application, *as well as* to manipulate or coerce behaviour *offline*. The emphasis on attention is to highlight both what is being attended (or surrendered) to through persuasive technologies, as well as to

⁶⁷ This should not suggest that any such wide-spread condition will not also aggravate or compound harms or marginalisation within particular forms of disadvantage and inequality.

acknowledge the opportunity cost for those withdrawn thoughts and actions that cannot be simultaneously taken up during the same period. The term *colonisation* is fundamental in order to highlight the actions of certain actors which are claiming and seizing human experience for their ends. It is not clear that this neologism has been precisely used, although it certainly has close variants. Lincoln Dahlberg has referred to the distracting power of online ads as “corporate colonization of online attention.”⁶⁸ Matthew Crawford has referred to “the colonization of life by *hassle*.”⁶⁹ George Pattison has referred to “colonization by science-based technology.”⁷⁰ Jonathan Crary has referred to “systemic colonisation of individual experience.”⁷¹ Tristan Garcia references “thought’s colonisation of our lives, and life’s colonisation of our thought.”⁷² James Williams, who has been perhaps most interested in the associated issues to *attention colonisation*, has not, to my knowledge, used the term precisely. He discusses both a negative diagnosis of “attentional capture and exploitation”⁷³ and an emancipatory framing for a positive alternative in “liberation of human attention.”⁷⁴ The term, as it is being taken up within this project, will be explored in the course of this chapter. It should be noted that while the term *colonisation* would imply the academic study of the legacy of colonialism and imperialism (postcolonial theory), it is not the intention of this project to inform attention colonisation with the many important implications of this active field. Rather, I believe the term *attention colonisation* bears certain liberative meanings for an emerging context and the

⁶⁸ Lincoln Dahlberg, “The Corporate Colonization of Online Attention and the Marginalization of Critical Communication?,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 29, no. 2 (24 Jul 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859904272745>.

⁶⁹ Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 7.

⁷⁰ Pattison, *Thinking About God*, 7.

⁷¹ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2014), 52.

⁷² Tristan Garcia, *The Life Intense: A Modern Obsession*, trans. Abigail RayAlexander, Christopher RayAlexander, John Cogburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 127.

⁷³ Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, xi.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

amplification of these meanings, in dialogue with postcolonial theory and theology, should, indeed, be taken up at a future point.

This chapter unfolds in three substantive sections: in section one, we begin with a background investigation into the emergence of the attention economy, primarily through the work of Tim Wu and Adam Alter. Wu provides a larger historical scope to the phenomena, while Alter focuses specifically on the engineered magnetism of certain powerful technologies today. In the second section, we investigate key insights from philosopher and former Google strategist, James Williams. Williams frames the issues of the attention economy in distinctly emancipatory terms. In the third section of the chapter, we consider how the attention economy and its exploitation of persons may extend beyond online activities to the exploitation of persons in virtually all aspects of their lives, today and especially into the future. This is explored through the work of Shoshanna Zuboff in *Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. This chapter will then conclude by summarising the key questions our exploration of attention colonisation invites from theology.

I. Perfecting the Attention Economy

History of the Attention Economy

Tim Wu, professor at Columbia Law School, in his 2016 book *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Struggle to Get Inside Our Heads*, acknowledges a crisis of attention, a condition of widespread “homo distractus.”⁷⁵ But rather than simply outlining predatory practices for the utilisation and commercialisation of human attention today, Wu maps the genealogy of these practices over the course of the last century. This historical scope has

⁷⁵ Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Struggle to Get Inside Our Heads* (London: Atlantic Books, 2017), 6.

two effects: first, it charts the origins of the commodification of human attention from, by today's standards, rather rudimentary means, to increasingly sophisticated ones at a much-increased velocity. Second, Wu's genealogy of attention merchants uncovers a blueprint which accompanies the seizing of attention and putting it to profitable use (that is reselling it). He writes, "It is a scheme that has been revised and renewed with every new technology, which always gains admittance into our lives under the expectation it will improve them—and improve them it does until it acquires motivations of its own, which can only grow and grow."⁷⁶ Wu trains our eye to the attention merchants' back-end aims which are not always consistent with the stated *raison d'être* or forward-facing goods and services.

Wu traces the history of the industrialised capture of attention to a time between the 1890s through to the 1920s, during the advent of advertising.⁷⁷ Prior to this time, businesses had largely relied on reputation and existing networks, and advertising was often considered vulgar and unnecessary.⁷⁸ In 1833, in New York City, Benjamin Day decided to sell a newspaper for 1 cent (as opposed to the going rate of 6 cents), making up the loss in the form of advertising. The readership, with their collective attention, was sold to his actual customers, advertisers. Rivals rushed to the opportunity and broadsheet newspapers were never the same. Elsewhere, in 1860 Paris, giant posters emerged with bright and contrasting colours, women partially nude, all created with a frenzied energy. These innovations in capturing the attention of passers-by was, in Wu's telling, another milestone for a nascent attention industry.⁷⁹ In 1915, the British government began "the first state-run attention harvest" in the form of a propaganda recruitment campaign.⁸⁰ In

⁷⁶ Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 324.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 37-40.

1917, the United States would borrow and enlarge these propaganda techniques. Austrian-American, Edward Bernays, recognised the opportunity to use propaganda techniques for commercial interests. He wrote, “I decided that if you could use propaganda for war, you could certainly use it for peace.”⁸¹ After the first World War, an emerging industry of advertising “grew to maturity as the brokers and engineers of the new attention economy.”⁸² Tactics such as branding, demand engineering and targeted advertising were honed. Wu points out that advertising companies saw themselves as capitalism’s priestly class.⁸³ A clerical, if not god-like orientation, is witnessed within Claude C. Hopkins’ 1923 manifesto, *Scientific Advertising*. He writes,

We change the currents of trade. We populate new empires, build up new industries and create customs and fashions. We dictate the food the baby shall eat, the clothes the mother shall wear, the way in which the home shall be furnished. ... Our very names are unknown. But there is scarcely a home, in city or hamlet, where some human being is not doing what we demand.⁸⁴

Hopkins invocation here of empires, of dictates and of a kind of puppet mastery fits well with Wu’s telling of the attention economy as one of invasion and subjugation. Wu titles the second part of his book, “The Conquest of Time and Space.”⁸⁵ Beginning in the 1930s, advertising moves beyond magazines, newspapers, billboards and what could be delivered through the post. Historically, until this point, the home was breached by attention merchants only by what material the home dweller, themselves, brought inside. While radios were introduced into American and British homes in the 1920s, the programming was largely sponsored. Direct advertising inside the sanctity of the home was then considered controversial and abhorrent.⁸⁶ But by 1930, radio had followed in the

⁸¹ Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 49.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

model of Benjamin Day and the newspapers—listeners’ attention was captured and then lucratively traded to advertisers. Television in 1950s also followed the same attention economy model, helping expand the marketplace within the home.

A series of incremental inventions and developments multiplied and intensified circumstances. Audience fragmentation through cable channels was one.⁸⁷ Another correlating development was the invention and utilisation of the television remote control. The fragmentation of the channels into an array of choices was “facilitated by the now ubiquitous and reliable remote control, the scepter by which the new sovereign decreed his destiny.”⁸⁸ To complete Wu’s telling, it would then be the advent of the computer⁸⁹ and ultimately the internet that initiated the most immense and intense collection of human attention since the television.⁹⁰ Wu explores the resale of attention through social media,⁹¹ and the ubiquitous smart phone.⁹² Of the smart phone, Wu writes, “Now a new device appeared capable of harvesting the attention that had been, as it were, left on the table, rather in the way fracking would later recover great reserves of oil considered wholly inaccessible.”⁹³

The principle at play, according to Wu, is that “every sliver of our attention is fair game for commercial exploitation.”⁹⁴ Matthew Crawford here agrees and colourfully describes the tenuous position of persons today, saying, “We are constantly being addressed with hyperpalatable stimuli. What sort of outlier would you have to be, what sort of freak of self-control, to resist those well-engineered cultural marshmallows?”⁹⁵ Wu points out that the sophisticated engineering for attentional control, through these well-

⁸⁷ Wu, *The Attention Merchants*, 175.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 308.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 309-10.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁹⁵ Crawford, *World Beyond Your Head*, 17.

engineered cultural marshmallows, has been informed by the best available behavioural science. This was already present, even if in a more embryonic form, among 1950s advertisers on Madison Avenue. In 1954 in the United States, there were already eight firms offering motivation research by professional psychologists to the advertising industry. A reporter in 1959 observed, “The difference between an ad man and a behavioural scientist became only a matter of degree.”⁹⁶ The trajectory for industrialised attention markets and their increasing sophistication, was cast decades ago and has only accelerated.

For Wu, it was religion, in a pre-democratic age, that was actually the first great harvester of human attention. It is interesting to note within Wu’s reform proposals that he also provides a sort of tribute to traditions, or other established norms, religious and otherwise. He writes, “And while there was much about the old reality that could be inconvenient or frustrating, it had the advantage of automatically creating protected spaces, with their salutary effects.”⁹⁷ He goes on to argue for a kind of “human reclamation project” and mentions as an example, restoring physical sanctuaries as “any place where we mean to interact with one another or achieve something we know requires a serious level of concentration.”⁹⁸ In the attention economy, Wu writes, “Where the human gaze goes, business soon follows...”⁹⁹ Here, the idea could be a non-market zone that protects the human gaze (and that which is gazing back) from further commodification. In addition to privileged spaces, Wu’s “human reclamation project” to recover individual and collective attention from, especially, commercial exploitation, also suggests a need for forms of life, or traditions, that could promote the shelter and rehabilitation of persons.

⁹⁶ Wu, *Attention Merchants*, 132.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 350-51.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 310.

Wu, in summary, has provided an historical framing for the commodification of attention and industry's restless and increasingly sophisticated expansion through to the present moment. He has, in a preliminary sense, alerted us to a pattern of incongruity between the up-front and back-end purposes of attention merchants. And Wu has opened a door to consider the role of religion for protected spaces from attention capture, of traditions or ways of life that could assist in protecting or reclaiming aspects of human experience.

In Wu's work, he does not appear to include subscription-only based services as being the work of attention merchants, since the model subverts the need for advertising revenue. Unfortunately, this causes him to overlook the exploitive nature of other technological interfaces that do not meet his precise focus. To help us open up the aperture in a move closer toward *attention colonisation*, we will now consider Adam Alter and his 2017 book *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*. Alter is a psychologist at the New York University Stern School of Business. In *Irresistible*, Alter outlines emerging forms of behavioural addiction resulting from highly-engineered experiences on technological platforms, games, and interactive experiences. He summarises the sophisticated tactics engineers, designers, and the businesses they represent, utilise to capture users' attention and relentlessly maximise engagement with smartphones, tablets, laptops, television, and fitness trackers. We will briefly look at these tactics and costs, as well as how Alter provides this study further openings to think about reform.

The Engineering of Tech Addiction

Alter wades into contentious waters by focusing on addiction. Historian David Courtwright, in his 2019 *The Age of Addiction: How Bad Habits Became Big Business*,

summarises the reactions well. After recent developments to recognise internet gaming disorders, including, notably, by the World Health Organization in 2018, he says,

Not everyone was happy with all the talk of addiction. Clinicians avoided it for fear of discouraging or stigmatizing patients. Libertarians dismissed it as an excuse for lack of discipline. Social scientists attacked it as medical imperialism. Philosophers detected equivocation, the misleading practice of using the same word to describe different things.¹⁰⁰

Richard Seymour, who has written with similar concerns about addiction and technology, and reviewing similar material, has said, “The problem is, no one knows what addiction is.”¹⁰¹ Alter, nevertheless, believes the term captures the seriousness of a problem already acknowledged by many both inside and outside of Silicon Valley. Behavioural addiction, for Alter, is when “a person can’t resist a behavior, which, despite addressing a deep psychological need in the short-term, produces significant harm in the long-term.”¹⁰² He cites studies that suggest 40 percent of the American population suffers from a type of internet-based behavioural addiction, be it, for example, with gaming or pornography. Also, he cites 48 percent of U.S. university students being ‘internet addicts,’ and another 40 percent being borderline or potential addicts.¹⁰³ He cites 46 percent of people not being able to bear life without their smartphones.¹⁰⁴ And, 59 percent of people report being dependent on social media such that their reliance makes them unhappy.¹⁰⁵

Alter also documents the increase in gaming and internet addiction treatment centres. The world’s first internet and gaming addiction treatment centre, reSTART, in Seattle, Washington, was founded in 2009 and utilises a three-phase treatment that

¹⁰⁰ David T. Courtwright, *The Age of Addiction: How Bad Habits Became Big Business* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2019), 2-3.

¹⁰¹ Richard Seymour, *The Twittering Machine* (London: The Indigo Press, 2019), 51.

¹⁰² Adam Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 20.

¹⁰³ Alter, *Irresistible*, 26. Other, more conservative, studies have suggested 1.5 to 8.2 percent suffer Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD); Hilarie Cash et al., “Internet Addiction: A Brief Summary of Research and Practice,” *Current Psychiatry Reviews* 8 (2012): 292.

¹⁰⁴ Alter, *Irresistible*, 27.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

includes a detox period of typically three weeks (45 days of treatment total).¹⁰⁶ In the early 2010s, China was the first to declare internet addiction a clinical disorder and a foremost public health concern for teenage citizens.¹⁰⁷ South Korea, in 2011, enacted an online game shutdown policy between the hours of midnight and 6:00AM to counter compulsive gaming through the night. This unpopular law was abolished in 2021 and replaced with an elective anti-addiction support system for families.¹⁰⁸ The 2013 edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* for the first time added behavioural addiction and mentioned internet gaming disorder, earmarking it for further research.¹⁰⁹ By 2017, there were four hundred treatment centres in China and twenty-four million were considered teenage addicts.¹¹⁰ As of 2017, there is a hospital in the United States, the Bradford Regional Medical Center in Pennsylvania, that treats behavioural addiction in a similar fashion to substance abuse. The 10-day programme at Bradford was founded by Kimberly Young, a psychologist who created the Internet Addiction Test¹¹¹ and an approach to internet addiction called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Internet Addiction (CBT-IA). In 2018, South Korea, one of the world's most wired nations, conducted a government survey which revealed that 20 percent of the population (or 10 million people) are considered to be at substantial risk for internet addiction. This has led Sungwon Roh, a psychiatrist at Seoul's Hanyang University, who is studying internet addiction, to suggest that internet addiction is a serious public health crisis. He describes the current response in South Korea, pointing out

¹⁰⁶ Alter, *Irresistible*, 248.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹⁰⁸ Choi Jae-hee, "Decade-old Gaming Curfew Ends at Midnight Friday, last modified 31 Dec 2021, https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20211231000388&ACE_SEARCH=1.

¹⁰⁹ "Internet Gaming," American Psychiatric Association, last modified Jun 2018, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/internet-gaming>. Note the APA reports that perhaps as few as 0.3 to 1.0% of the population might qualify for an internet gaming disorder.

¹¹⁰ Alter, *Irresistible*, 252.

¹¹¹ Kimberly S. Young, *Internet Addiction Test* (Wood Dale, IL: Stoelting, 2017), https://stoeltingco.com/Psychological/media/IAT_web_sample.pdf.

“there are regional education offices that provide services such as in-school counselling, screening surveys, preventative discipline and, for severe cases, addiction camps.”¹¹² In addition, the NHS in England opened the National Centre for Gaming Disorders in 2019.¹¹³

There is increasing awareness that attachment to personal technological devices, especially smartphones, is having personal and social consequences. Laurie Santos, Yale professor of psychology, has characterised the literature for the specific ways smart phones are affecting social connections and relationships as “striking and really scary.”¹¹⁴ She describes how, in studies by Nicholas Epley and Juliana Schroeder, persons often misjudge both the social costs and benefits of engaging with others, subjecting themselves to self-imposed isolation.¹¹⁵ Santos believes the issue is not simply one of avoiding people, the issue is often not even noticing others to begin with. She cites work by Elizabeth Dunn, psychologist at the University of British Columbia, who has published research with titles such as: “Smartphones Reduce Smiles Between Strangers,”¹¹⁶ “Smartphone Use Undermines Enjoyment of Face-to-Face Social Interactions,”¹¹⁷ and “Smartphones Distract Parents from Cultivating Feelings of Connection When Spending Time with Their

¹¹² “Hooked On the Internet, South Korean Teens Go Into Digital Detox,” NPR, 13 Aug 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/13/748299817/hooked-on-the-internet-south-korean-teens-go-into-digital-detox>.

¹¹³ “The National Centre for Gaming Disorders,” NHS, accessed 26 Dec 2022, <https://www.cnwl.nhs.uk/national-centre-gaming-disorders>.

¹¹⁴ Laurie Santos, “#196-The Science of Happiness: A Conversation with Laurie Santos,” 10 Apr 2020, in *Making Sense with Sam Harris*, podcast, 30:42, <https://www.samharris.org/podcasts/making-sense-episodes/196-science-happiness>.

¹¹⁵ Nicholas Epley, Juliana Schroeder, and Isabel Gauthier, “Mistakenly Seeking Solitude,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 143, no. 5 (October 2014): 1980-1999, <https://doi.org/10.1037/A0037323>.

¹¹⁶ Kostadin Kushlev et al., “Smartphones Reduce Smiles Between Strangers,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 91, (Feb 2019):12-16, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.09.023>.

¹¹⁷ Ryan Dwyer J. et al., “Smartphone Use Undermines Enjoyment of Face-to-Face Social Interactions,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 78 (Sept 2018): 233-239, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.10.007>.

Children.”¹¹⁸ Santos suggests that amidst a war for our attentional resources, relationships beyond these devices are impacted by the teams of designers playing on persons’ dopamine levels to maximise engagement.¹¹⁹ Santos’ description of the research is helpful as she ties together degrees of injuries, both personal and interpersonal, and makes clear that an aggravating, predatory factor, is found within the design of technologies.

Santos’ suggestion that designers are gaming dopamine (with the attendant social costs this aggravates) is not exactly a secret. In 2017, founder of Napster and the first president of Facebook, Sean Parker, openly admitted that in order to maximise user time on Facebook, the idea was to provide “a little dopamine hit every once in awhile...[a] variable reinforcement—in the form of ‘likes’ and comments. The goal was to keep users glued to the hive, chasing those hits while leaving a stream of raw materials in their wake.”¹²⁰ Chamath Palihapitiya, a former vice president for user growth, also at Facebook, lamented, “the short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops we’ve created are destroying how society works...This is a global problem.”¹²¹

Adam Alter outlines the science for these addictive behaviours. He writes,

There’s...a pattern that describes the brain of a drug addict as he injects heroin, and a second that describes the brain of a gaming addict as he fires up a new World of Warcraft quest. They turn out to be almost identical... ‘Drugs and addictive behaviors activate the same reward center in the brain,’ according to Claire Gillan, a neuroscientist who studies obsessive and repetitive behaviors... ‘The difference is in their magnitude and intensity.’¹²²

And how does this reward centre get activated? Alter summarises the research,

For decades, neuroscientists believed that only drugs and alcohol could stimulate addiction...But more recent research has shown that addictive

¹¹⁸ Kostadin Kushlev and Elizabeth W. Dunn, “Smartphones Distract Parents from Cultivating Feelings of Connection When Spending Time with Their Children,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 36, no. 6 (10 Apr 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407518769387>.

¹¹⁹ Santos, in *Sam Harris*, 38:40.

¹²⁰ Alex Hern, “‘Never Get High on Your Own Supply’—Why Social Media Bosses Don’t Use Social Media,” *Guardian*, 23 Jan 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jan/23/never-get-high-on-your-own-supply-why-social-media-bosses-dont-use-social-media>.

¹²¹ Chamath Palihapitiya, “View from the Top,” Stanford Graduate School of Business, filmed 13 Nov 2017, video of talk, 22:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMotykw0SIk&t=1365s>.

¹²² Alter, *Irresistible*, 71.

behaviors produce the same brain responses that follow drug abuse. In both cases, several regions deep inside the brain release a chemical called dopamine, which attaches itself to receptor throughout the brain that in turn produce an intense flush of pleasure.¹²³

Alter describes that the body eventually interprets the repeated flooding of dopamine as a fault and produces less and less dopamine. And as tolerance is developed in the brain and the dopamine-regions retreat, the lows between each high dip lower, and the dopamine stays inoperative until there is an over-invigoration again. Ultimately, “when the source of that euphoria vanishes, it struggles to cope with the fact it’s now producing far less dopamine than it used to. And so the cycle continues as the addict seeks out the source of his addiction, and the brain responds by producing less and less dopamine after each hit.”¹²⁴ Alter’s recounting of the neuroscience is consonant with prominent voices on addiction. Nora Volkow, director of the U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse, says, “Addiction is all about the dopamine.”¹²⁵ Volkow is speaking in the context of drugs and alcohol abuse but, as Alter pointed out from Claire Gillan, the mechanism for behavioural addiction is the same, the difference is degree and intensity.

We have now unpacked Alter’s basic argument for behavioural addiction in relationship to certain technological interfaces, as well as evidence for associated personal and social ills. How, then, do engineers and designers *actually* game what Palihapitiya called “the short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops” of users that leads to maximising profits for technology companies and their partners? Alter summarises six general techniques engineers have been perfecting for addictive experiences, much of which has been informed from behavioural science. They are: (1) Compelling goals that are just beyond reach. (2) Irresistible and unpredictable positive feedback. (3) A sense of incremental progress and improvement. (4) Tasks that become slowly more difficult over

¹²³ Alter, *Irresistible*, 71.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹²⁵ Seymore, *The Twittering Machine*, 52-53.

time. (5) Unresolved tensions that demand resolution. And (6), strong social connections.¹²⁶

Regarding strong social feedback mechanisms, Nir Eyal, former video game designer and applied psychologist, points out that small stressors like FOMO (fear of missing out), boredom, and frustration are exploited by Instagram and others, and prompt the trigger of “an almost instantaneous and often mindless action to quell the negative sensation.”¹²⁷ Here we find a profit centre existing not simply from what the company is able to provide, but through what they cannot or do not fully satisfy, and for which the user nevertheless attempts to mollify. Like the engineering of a soda which has certain rewards without ever quite quenching your thirst, companies are aware of the human necessity for social connection, and profiting when we cannot quite sort or satisfy the misalignment.

Alter observes an interesting distinction between marketing rhetoric and personal practice among tech executives and engineers, when he says many of “the world’s greatest public technocrats [are] also its greatest private technophobes.”¹²⁸ Here, Alter helps us to question the degree that the rhetoric for the inevitability of certain products and services is driven by larger marketing and industry growth imperatives, which is distinct from personal practice or preference. Silicon Valley executives and engineers disavowing or marginalising their own inventions (whether privately or upon early retirement) also points to the role of privilege for those that might seek to move beyond the reaches of an attention economy. Crawford observed in Charles de Gaulle airport, for example, that the

¹²⁶ Alter, *Irresistible*, 9.

¹²⁷ Nir Eyal and Ryan Hoover, *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), Ch.2 “Trigger,” iBook.

¹²⁸ Alter, *Irresistible*, 2. For further examples see: Paul Lewis, “‘Our Minds Can Be Hijacked:’ The Tech Insiders Who Fear a Smartphone Dystopia,” *Guardian*, 6 Oct 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia>; Alex Hern, “‘Never Get High on Your Own Supply,’” *Guardian*, 23 Jan 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jan/23/never-get-high-on-your-own-supply-why-social-media-bosses-dont-use-social-media>.

executive lounges are places of quiet with limited advertisements, without the presence of obtrusive media.¹²⁹ It has also been argued that women are often less able to disconnect due to requirements of emotional “labour” in care of family members.¹³⁰ Others have a de facto need for a connected device to learn the location and hours of their temp job the following day, for example. Many will not have the means or option for a deviceless nature hike before a family dinner discussing history and literature.¹³¹

On the other hand, Lewis reports that not everyone is burdened by guilt. For example, Nir Eyal says, “We’re not freebasing Facebook and injecting Instagram here...we can’t blame tech makers for making their products so good we want to use them.” Chris Marcellino, former Apple engineer who helped develop push-notifications says, “It is not inherently evil to bring people back to your product...It’s capitalism.”¹³² While we will return to capitalism later in this chapter, it is sufficient here to note that regret or concern characterises many of the insiders responsible for well-known devices and features of persuasive technologies.

Alter’s reform suggestions are mostly of an engineering, human resource management, and public policy nature, including: workplaces to shut down at 6:00PM, email being disabled from midnight to 5:00AM, games being built with natural stopping points, demetricating social media platforms, and introducing children slowly to screens.¹³³ Given the extensive nature of the problem of persuasive technologies, these remedies, whilst practical, do not fit the scale of this project. Alter does, though, provide one helpful insight, which is the positive role for alternative behavioural architectures.

¹²⁹Crawford, *World Beyond Your Head*, 12.

¹³⁰ Julia B. Ticona, “Left to Our Own Devices: Evaluations of Personal Technology Use” (paper presented at the 109th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, CA, August 16-19, 2014).

¹³¹ Nick Bilton, “Steve Job Was a Low-Tech Parent,” *New York Times*, 10 Sept 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/11/fashion/steve-jobs-apple-was-a-low-tech-parent.html>.

¹³² Lewis, ““Our Minds Can Be Hijacked.””

¹³³ Alter, *Irresistible*, 319.

Behavioural architecture, as Alter describes it, is a technique for treatment of addiction that purposely “redesign[s] your environment so temptations are as close to absent as possible.”¹³⁴ Important principles include the power of proximity: “whatever’s nearby will have a bigger impact on your mental life than whatever is farther way.”¹³⁵ Also, care is taken to dampen unavoidable temptations.¹³⁶ For this project’s purposes, we can ask, how might theology speak toward an architecture of wellbeing for those enduring relentless attention exploitation and capture? Crawford has called for wider public “attentional commons,” resources held in common like water and air.¹³⁷ Wu, as we have earlier seen, has suggested some kind of physical sanctuaries for a human reclamation project. Alter suggests something similar.¹³⁸ But in addition to physical sanctuaries, behavioural architecture prompts the question: what are the alternative centres or poles of meaning/value that may orient us in such a structure? Alter says, “Sometimes, the problem isn’t that we’re addicted to the wrong kind of behaviours, but rather that we abandon the right kinds.”¹³⁹

Did Alter provide any insight for the right kinds of behaviour? For my project, there were two. First, in discussing addictive video game design, he wrote pragmatically, “*Sluggishness is the enemy of addiction, because people respond more sharply to rapid links between action and outcome* [emphasis added].”¹⁴⁰ In an age of attention industrialisation, I am wondering how might something like repose act as subversion or retardation of electrical intensity? Second, Alter in outlining the 45-day treatment at reSTART, points out, after detox, the patients “learn the basic life skills that many of them

¹³⁴ Alter, *Irresistible*, 273.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹³⁷ Crawford, *World Beyond Your Head*, 11.

¹³⁸ Alter, *Irresistible*, 319-20.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 291-92.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

lack, like cooking an egg, cleaning a toilet, making their beds, and, most important, managing their emotions...They also learn to exercise and to embrace nature...They train at the center's gym every day, and many of them become quite fit."¹⁴¹ The second phase then involves moving to a half-way house where the skills learned in phase one are applied. Patients also apply for volunteer positions, jobs, or take college courses. Here we can see a series of behaviours or practices which, in the case of reSTART, *increased engagement with realities where fluency was seemingly weak*. While enraptured in heavily engineered and often manipulable online environments, "basic life skills" had languished or had never been developed. Here we see that, at least within the compressed experience of reSTART, that other skills (or fluencies) are provided space to develop.

A final note on Alter: it is important, for this liberationist project, to keep addiction as an example of a predatory relationship, as one might understand tobacco manufacturing and marketing. But this project seeks to understand addictive technologies within more expansive or fundamental phenomena, a larger story. For this reason, I will not take up a language of addiction or pursue the problem as a narrow, foremost concern. I seek a better understanding to the questions of what liberation is *from* more fundamentally in a culture of technology (beyond merely behavioural addiction), and what is liberation *for*? Also, what are the opportunity costs associated with considerable attendance to persuasive technologies? And what can theology say in these circumstances?

In summary of section one, Wu has provided the historical framing for an attention industry which Alter has shown has come of age through persuasive technologies today. Alter has widened the scope from attention merchants (especially in cooperation with advertising), to a larger concern for attention colonisation through these persuasive technologies. Both Wu and Alter have illustrated different types of misalignments and

¹⁴¹ Alter, *Irresistible*, 248-49.

asymmetry between the attention industry and its users. (This will continue to be expanded on in sections two and three.) Both scholars opened doors for us to ask how faith traditions could animate behavioural architecture that focuses upon critical poles for human meaning and could promote engagement where fluency is weak today. I have noted that, beyond merely behavioural addiction, that we still seek to understand what liberation is *from* more fundamentally. We now turn to James Williams who helps us to take a further step toward answering this question.

II. The Liberation of Human Attention

James Williams' 2018 book, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*, is a distillation, in part, of his doctoral thesis entitled, "Freedom and Persuasion in the Attention Economy"¹⁴² completed at Oxford's Internet Institute, under the supervision of Professor Luciano Floridi. Williams worked previously at Google for ten years and was recognised by Google with its highest award (the Founders' Award) for his work on advertising tools and products. In this section, we will unpack several key points from Williams regarding the capture and exploitation of human attention, and the *emancipatory* project it compels. While both Wu and Alter are helpful in their accounts, Williams assists us to better grasp the implicit costs from "injured capacities of attention."¹⁴³ I have earlier raised a question about the opportunity costs associated with considerable attendance to persuasive technologies. This question may, in part, help answer the larger question of what is liberation *from* in a culture of technology—at least in a preliminary, more narrow sense. Williams has a rather straight-forward understanding of the critical loss associated with attention colonisation, which is that it impedes, if not precludes, the conception and pursuance of individual and/or collective

¹⁴² James Wilson Williams, "Freedom and Persuasion in the Attention Economy" (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2017).

¹⁴³ Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, 127.

aims. Williams will also provide a definition of “attention” which will become operational for this project.

Williams’ foremost argument is that “in order to do anything that matters, we must first be able to give attention to the things that matter.”¹⁴⁴ And while this has never been an easy task, the industrialised capture of human attention by powerful attention economy actors makes this task increasingly difficult. He writes,

For too long, we’ve minimized the threats of this intelligent, adversarial persuasion as mere ‘distraction,’ or minor annoyance. In the short-term, these challenges can indeed frustrate our ability to do the things we want to do. In the longer term, however, they can make it harder for us to live the lives we want to live, or, even worse, undermine fundamental capacities such as reflection and self-regulation, making it harder, in the words of philosopher Harry Frankfurt, to ‘want what we want to want.’ Seen in this light, these new attentional adversaries threaten not only the success but even the integrity of the human will, at both individual and collective levels.¹⁴⁵

As we saw in Chapter 1, this understanding leads Williams to suggest, “*The liberation of human attention may be the defining moral and political struggle of our time* [emphasis mine].”¹⁴⁶

Williams observes there is a discrepancy between the goals of users on one side of the screen and the multitude of designers and engineers working for technology companies on the other. The design of many technologies are being guided by ‘engagement’ goals which are defined as “maximizing the amount of time you spend with their product, keeping you clicking or tapping or scrolling as much as possible, or showing you as many pages or ads as they can.”¹⁴⁷ Common goals or metrics include: Number of Views, Total Conversions, Time on Site and Number of Clicks.¹⁴⁸ This misalignment of goals is accompanied by a mismatch of power. Williams rejects language about persons simply

¹⁴⁴ Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, xi.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

needing to adapt to distraction through better self-regulation as patronising and misleading. To suggest this is like saying, “Thousands of the world’s brightest psychologists, statisticians, and designers are now spending the majority of their waking lives figuring out how to tear down your willpower—so you just need to have more willpower.”¹⁴⁹ Williams’ echoes Alter’s outlining of the techniques for attention capture, including “unprecedented infrastructure of analytics, experimentation, message delivery, customization, and automation,”¹⁵⁰ the exploitation of cognitive vulnerabilities,¹⁵¹ exploitation of human biases including: anchoring effects, framings effects, social comparison, and loss aversion (such as FOMO).¹⁵² Williams is more cautious than Alter to avoid many of the most contentious issues in discussions of the attention economy. He steers clear of claiming the presence of addiction, per se, in order to keep the focus on ethically questionable design which diminishes freedom. Neither does he want to argue that *all* utilisation of non-rational psychological biases is harmful.¹⁵³ Zuboff, we will later see, will argue this remains risky and naïve. For Williams, the predominant concern is to have technology that lines up with the values and goals of the users (even if this utilises behavioural science to assist).

But what is meant by attention, anyways? What precisely is this that is being colonised or commodified? Williams argues that researchers in specialized psychology and neuroscience literatures (e.g., *The Oxford Handbook of Attention*) are simply not in agreement. Williams suggests, however, that the meaning which is in keeping with day-to-day vernacular is “what cognitive scientists call the ‘spotlight’ of attention, or the

¹⁴⁹ Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, 101.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 99.

direction of our moment-to-moment awareness within the immediate task domain. The ‘spotlight’ of attention is the sort of attention that helps us do what we want to do.”¹⁵⁴

To go further, Williams suggests we ask, “What do we pay when we ‘pay’ attention?”¹⁵⁵ This leads him to consider the ways in which we ‘pay’ with the lives we might have lived. This raises the question of “having the freedom to navigate your life in the way you want, across all scales of the human experience.”¹⁵⁶ In developing his operating definition, Williams takes up John Stuart Mill, prioritising inner liberty and outlines a kind of “freedom of attention.” With William James, he expands attention towards conceptions of the human will or “the full stack of navigational capacities across all levels of human life.”¹⁵⁷ With Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Williams develops beyond a concern for individual will to the effects for collective will. In the end, Williams will describe attention as consisting of three “lights”:

The ‘Spotlight’ Our immediate capacities for navigating awareness and action toward tasks. Enables us to do what we want to do. [Pertains to *doing*.]

The ‘Starlight’ Our broader capacities for navigating life ‘by the stars’ of our higher goals and values. Enables us to be who we want to be. [Pertains to *being*.]

The ‘Daylight’ Our fundamental capacities—such as reflection, metacognition, reason, and intelligence—that enable us to define [know] our goals and values to begin with. Enables us to ‘want what we want to want.’ [Pertains to *knowing*.]¹⁵⁸

For Williams, whenever one of these lights is hindered or occluded, a kind of costly distraction results.

¹⁵⁴ Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, 45.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

Williams frames attention in such a way as to preserve the freedom of human will as a keystone for democracy.¹⁵⁹ It is likely this will strike some (Saul Smilansky for one)¹⁶⁰ as preserving pretentious and illusory capacities for autonomy. Others may find this effort as carrying a hint of human exceptionalism which seems to preserve the validity of whatever humans do, whatever humans want. In an age of global climate emergency, the *deemphasis* on living *your* life as you wish, a *deemphasis* on pre-eminently *human* tasks, goals, and capacities, will strike some as critical. This, however, in my opinion, would be to read too much into Williams. He is not attempting to elevate anthropocentric priorities. He is, in reaction to emerging powers of persuasion and behavioural modification, outlining a freedom, a right, or even a space outside the priorities of powerful, persuasive technologies. To be afforded the opportunity to consider our goals and values is also an opportunity to consider the value of the non-human, for example. To assume that human will is always of a piece with anthropocentrism opens a backdoor, this study will later consider in section three, to deliver the coordination of human networks to a relatively few human actors and the corporate interests they represent or with which they collude. The context for which Williams writes is one where powerful data accumulation and machine learning, combined with sophisticated attention capture, can fade self-awareness. Williams is concerned that persons can be impeded or precluded from consideration of matters of greater importance to us, as well as our position relative to these goals, values and aspirations.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, 47.

¹⁶⁰ Saul Smilansky, *Free Will and Illusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁶¹ This said, appeals for autonomy will also be challenged by communitarian critiques (e.g., Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre) which are wary of a liberal project toward a kind of self-sufficiency. My work should stay alert to both naming and understanding the *negative* attachments in question (e.g., predatory persuasive technologies) *and* the necessary social means and ends for liberation. Borgmann, Feenberg and Gutiérrez will do much work in this regard.

Is Williams' definition of attention sufficient? If we seek a definition in keeping with common understanding and usage, I believe it is. Joshua Cohen, in *Attention: Dispatches from a Land of Distraction*, provides a useful distillation of the history of attention, both in its etymology and its usage in religion and in the West. "Attention" comes from the Latin noun *attentio*. The Latin borrows, through *ad tenso*, from the Greek noun *proseché/pro soché* which means "to grip," "to grasp," "to take with the hands or hold/mold with the fingers."¹⁶² The older Greek verb *prosochô* "is a term indicating grasping, gripping, steering a ship, enlisting the wind to get to port even if the wind is against you."¹⁶³ *Attentio* was written by Cicero, in the first century B.C.E., as *attention animi* or "mental concentration." In English, beginning in at least 1340, attention has been used in a connotation we still recognise today. Fourteenth-century Chaucer, sixteenth-century Shakespeare, and seventeenth-century Milton all used attention in familiar ways.¹⁶⁴ Today the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines *attention* as firstly, "The action, fact, or state of attending or giving heed; earnest direction of the mind, consideration, or regard..." And second, "Practical consideration, observant care, notice."¹⁶⁵ To understand attention as from the Greek "to grip" or "to grasp" and from the *OED* as "giving heed" or "observant care" is to understand why attention has always implied, if not explicitly, a correlation to something necessary or of importance, to something of value. The Sumerian wisdom literature, *The Instructions of Shuruppak*, ca. 2600 B.C.E., the oldest text associated with an author is translated, "My son, I will give you instructions: you have to pay attention! Zi-ud-sara, let me speak a word to you: you

¹⁶² Joshua Cohen, *Attention: Dispatches from a Land of Distraction* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2018), 520-21.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 547.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 573.

¹⁶⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "attention," accessed 17 Jun 2022, <https://www-oed-com.manchester.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/12802?redirectedFrom=attention#eid>.

must pay attention!...The instructions of an old man are priceless; do what I say!”¹⁶⁶ Here, to pay attention is to be alert. Pay attention to *this* of value! Similarly, it is of no surprise that, as Wu made clear, religion has always been interested in attention. Cohen also traces Christian attention, as both for heeding what is important as well as mental capacity for self-understanding,¹⁶⁷ from the apostles, through the desert ascetics, Augustine, Aquinas, and onward. Williams, in recognising the risks associated with the attention economy, has drawn a bright red line around what has been understood as a human function for comprehending, appreciating, and expressing value and higher goals.

What are Williams’ reform proposals? As was the case with Alter, for Williams the problem and solution are often both very much of design. For Williams, the task is “to bring the technologies of our attention onto our side.”¹⁶⁸ He proposes a “Designer’s Oath,”¹⁶⁹ akin to the Hippocratic Oath for physicians. A Designer’s Oath is an interesting proposal but framing the issue as a design problem is limiting for my purposes. It risks failing to consider the larger economic or technological way of life (including radical alternatives), which also inform or shape the design and regulation of code. He also provides the industry a kind of absolution, writing, “Ultimately, *there is no one to blame.*”¹⁷⁰ This raises the issues: why is no one to blame for an enslavement of attention, if the solution involves the very same cadre of designers, engineers, and executives? Williams denounces an entire industry as employing “attentional serfdom,”¹⁷¹ but somehow, we can identify the serfs but not the lords?

Williams (similar to Wu and Alter) also points out that for most of human history, one inherited cultural and religious constraints, and these provided “a kind of library of

¹⁶⁶ Cohen, *Attention: Dispatches from a Land of Distraction*, 525-26.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 550.

¹⁶⁸ Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, 106.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 120-21.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

limits that was embedded in your social and physical environment.”¹⁷² With the rise of modernism and secularism, there was a collapse in many of these constraints. Williams believes this left us vulnerable, in an age of information abundance, to a self-regulatory burden in the face of a powerful and sophisticated attention industry. Williams urges us not to consider these as “first world problems” as they “carry large implications for the societal goals of justice and equality.”¹⁷³ While he does not propose retrieving or reforming religion and theology, it is reasonable to ask in reply, how can theology provoke or nurture certain values or higher goals on this side of the screen, how might it help embed constraints, or to strengthen persons and collectives opposite such conditions and operators?

Williams, in an echo to Wu’s human reclamation project, is also concerned, in this context, with dehumanisation. He writes, “the digital attention economy directly militates against the foundations of democracy and justice. It undermines fundamental capacities that are preconditions for self-determination at both the individual and collective level...[this] epistemic distraction *literally* dehumanizes.”¹⁷⁴ Elsewhere he asks, “Is there a ‘minimum viable mind’ we should take great pains to preserve?”¹⁷⁵ Williams sees the capture and exploitation of human attention and volition as being against human dignity. Without any expressed religious perspective, he is making a case for attentional serfdom as degradation of human beings. We might ask in return, how might theology express the value of human beings’ attentional capacities and autonomy and decry the injustice of

¹⁷² Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, 21.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 107. See also literature on “neurorights.” For example: Philipp Kellmeyer, “Neurorights: A Human Rights-Based Approach for Governing Neurotechnologies,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Responsible Artificial Intelligence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Silja Voeneke, Philipp Kellmeyer, Oliver Mueller, and Wolfram Burgard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 412-416; Pablo López-Silva and Luca Valera, *Protecting the Mind: Challenges in Law, Neuroprotection, and Neurorights*, vol. 49 (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2022); also see: The NeuroRights Foundation, <https://neurorightsfoundation.org/>.

attentional colonisation? Wu had mentioned our state as *homo distractus*. If *distraction* first means “forcible disruption, division, or severance,”¹⁷⁶ this could be understood as the human in a kind of torn and injured form.

To summarise where we are after section two, Williams has helped us build on Wu and Alter, to understand that a more fundamental problem from attention colonisation is the impeding, if not preclusion, of the conception and pursuance of individual and/or collective values and goals expressed through human will. Here, liberation from attention colonisation is freedom for a human autonomy necessary to pursue goals and values outside the constraints of persuasive technologies. Williams shares Wu and Alter’s concerns for misalignment and asymmetry between the attention industry and its users. He also helps open a similar door for us to ask how theology and the church might enable constraints and to strengthen persons and collectives opposite these conditions and operators. He also concurs on a positive anthropology which he wants to protect over against dehumanisation from attention colonisation, which we have noted, theology may contribute. Williams, however, has been less helpful in understanding the outlines of the industry and the actors responsible. He is also treating this as a mostly online phenomenon. With this in mind, we now turn to the third and final section of this chapter, investigating Shoshana Zuboff’s work, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*.

III. New Frontiers for Colonisation

Shoshana Zuboff is a social psychologist and the Charles Edward Wilson Professor Emerita at Harvard Business School and a former Faculty Associate at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School. Her 2019 book, *The Age of*

¹⁷⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “distraction,” accessed 17 Jun 2022, <https://www-oed-com.manchester.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/55730?redirectedFrom=distraction#eid>.

Surveillance Capitalism, has drawn considerable attention both within academia and the wider public. Zuboff outlines a pattern for an emerging form of capitalism that she argues is claiming human experience as raw material for behavioural data, fabricated into prediction products and traded in behavioural futures markets.¹⁷⁷ She describes her method as that of “a social scientist inclined toward theory, history, philosophy and quantitative research,”¹⁷⁸ informed by Durkheim, Marx, Weber, Arendt, Adorno, Polanyi, Sartre, and Milgram.¹⁷⁹ Her book goes much further than Wu, Alter and Williams to outline not simply the colonisation of human attention *online*, but rather the *entire lives* of persons are being subject to the priorities of certain market actors with unprecedented knowledge and technological power.

In section three, we will first outline Zuboff’s basic argument for surveillance capitalism, including four important features or themes. Second, we will consider Zuboff’s proposal for resistance. Third, we will pick up additional relevant criticisms to her work. Fourth, and finally, we will summarise what questions Zuboff’s work prompts for theology.

Overview of Surveillance Capitalism

Zuboff argues “over the centuries we have imagined threat in the form of state power. This left us wholly unprepared to defend ourselves from new companies with imaginative names run by young geniuses that seemed able to provide us exactly what we yearn for at little or no cost.”¹⁸⁰ What did she suppose we yearned for? We desired to continue the modern project of emancipation, to be the author of our life with its unique value, and embrace the promise of a networked environment with advocacy-oriented

¹⁷⁷ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance*, 8.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

values.¹⁸¹ But, at “the precise moment at which our needs are met is also the precise moment at which our lives are plundered for behavioural data, and all for the sake of others’ gain”¹⁸² intended to support neoliberal growth and profits. Zuboff summarises the plundering in this way:

Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data. Although some of these data are applied to product or service improvement, the rest are declared as a proprietary *behavioral surplus*, fed into advanced manufacturing processes known as ‘machine intelligence,’ and fabricated into *prediction products* that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later. Finally, these prediction products are traded in a new kind of marketplace for behavioral predictions that I call *behavioral futures markets*. Surveillance capitalists have grown immensely wealthy from trading operations, for many companies are eager to lay bets on our future behavior.¹⁸³

Companies on the forefront of surveillance capitalism are in a race to acquire more and more data to better create powerful prediction products. This *prediction imperative* has driven companies beyond simply economies of scale (online), to economies of scope and economies of action. Economies of scope add variety to the data set by extending into the offline “real world” and adding depth by understanding users emotions, moods, and vulnerabilities.¹⁸⁴ Economies of action are interventions to shape behaviour, to “nudge, tune, herd, manipulate, and modify behaviour in specific directions by executing actions as subtle as inserting a specific phrase in your Facebook news feed, timing the appearance of a BUY button on your phone, or shutting down your car engine when an insurance payment is late.”¹⁸⁵ Zuboff argues the prediction imperative, executed through economies of scale, scope, and action, are a direct affront to our ability “to act free of the influence of

¹⁸¹ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 53.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

illegitimate forces that operate outside our awareness to influence, modify, and condition our behaviour.”¹⁸⁶

What emerges from this computational architecture of devices, spaces, and things is a new category of power Zuboff calls *instrumentarianism* which is the leveraging of incredible data and freedom possessed by the surveillance capitalists to direct behaviour toward determined outcomes. She writes, “In the model of machine confluence, the ‘freedom’ of each individual machine is subordinated to the knowledge of the system as a whole. Instrumentarian power aims to organize, herd, and tune society to achieve a similar *social confluence*, in which group pressure and computational certainty replace politics and democracy, extinguishing the felt reality and social function of an individualized existence.”¹⁸⁷ This social/machine confluence is coordinated through what is sometimes referred to as “ambient computing,” “ubiquitous computing,” or the “Internet of Things” (IoT), which Zuboff terms the “apparatus.” The apparatus is her word for the “always-on instrumentation, datafication, connection, communication, and computation of all things, animate and inanimate, and all processes—natural, human, physiological, chemical, machine, administrative, vehicular, financial.”¹⁸⁸ It is in this environment of surveillance capitalism, with behavioural data being captured from increasingly ubiquitous devices and sensors, with an attendant power to shape human behaviour through that apparatus, that Zuboff argues are the “essential questions that define knowledge, authority, and power in our time: *Who knows? Who decides? Who decides who decides?*”¹⁸⁹

Since the discovery of behavioural surplus as a new asset class (beginning with Google in 2001, Facebook in 2008, and more recently, Microsoft in 2014), what was once considered nonmarket interactions and behaviour with only marginal application for

¹⁸⁶ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 195.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

service improvements (e.g., improved search), were discovered to have tremendous value, first for advertising. In the case of Google, this discovery produced a 3,590 percent increase in revenue in fewer than four years.¹⁹⁰ Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, realised the company had missed opportunities to compete with Google and authorised a study from a market intelligence firm, IDC, that concluded, “companies taking advantage of their data have the potential to raise an additional \$1.6 trillion in revenue over companies that don’t.”¹⁹¹ While surveillance capitalism grew out from digital companies, the next wave of surveillance capitalists came in the form of telecom and cable companies. And now, companies from all sectors are joining in pursuit of growth and profit from behavioural data, including “retail, finance, fitness, insurance, automotive, travel hospitality, health, and education.”¹⁹² The collection of data to create predictions about user behaviour was, as was indicated, first intended for advertisers. A leaked confidential document from Facebook in 2018 referred to their “machine learning expertise” which was intended to help their customers’ “core business challenges” using Facebook’s ability “to predict future behaviour.” Zuboff summarises this as predictions which can “trigger advertisers to intervene promptly, targeting aggressive messages to stabilize loyalty and thus achieve guaranteed outcomes by altering the course of the future.”¹⁹³

While advertisers may have been a first predominant customer, Hal Varian, Google’s chief economist has written of future opportunities from “new contractual forms due to better monitoring.”¹⁹⁴ This is, for example, the behavioural underwriting with which insurance companies (health, auto, life) can optimise. This is made possible through what former CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt, said at the 2015 Davos World

¹⁹⁰ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 87.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

Economic Forum: “The internet will disappear. There will be so many IP addresses...so many devices, sensors, things you are wearing, things that you are interacting with, that you won’t sense it.”¹⁹⁵ There does not appear to be an outer limit yet for how behavioural data and prediction products, together with ubiquitous computing, can be monetised. And it is not simply about herding someone, for example, toward a certain fast-food chain or a particular brand of toothpaste. It is also, by Zuboff’s description, about an opportunity for those with the data and levers of influence to shape or determine outcomes. This was underscored by Nadella in 2016 when he told Microsoft developers, “The intelligent edge is the interface between the computer and the real world...you can search the real world for people, objects and activities, and *apply policies to them...*”¹⁹⁶ We appear to have come a long way from the network as a kind of utopian democratisation of knowledge and reordering of society toward inclusion. Nearly all of these highways, data harvesters, and devices have resident owners and operators, often with their own priorities.

Four Key Features/Themes

Prior to reviewing Zuboff’s most useful reform proposal, we will consider four features or themes of surveillance capitalism that are helpful to this project. They are: (1) the asymmetry of knowledge and power, (2) the role of euphemism, (3) the ideology of inevitabilism, and (4), surveillance capitalism as colonisation.

Asymmetry of knowledge and power. An asymmetry of knowledge and power has already been noticed in our review of the attention economy, but Zuboff has trained our eyes on the incredible and unprecedented concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power being created, and the dilemmas this causes. This is best captured when she has asked: *Who knows? Who decides? Who decides who decides?* She writes, “The

¹⁹⁵ Chris Matyszczyk, “The Internet Will Vanish, Says Google’s Eric Schmidt,” *CNET*, 22 Jan 2015, <https://www.cnet.com/culture/the-internet-will-vanish-says-googles-schmidt/>.

¹⁹⁶ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 410.

knowledge that now displaces our freedom is proprietary. The knowledge is *theirs*, but the lost freedom belongs solely to *us*.”¹⁹⁷ This is a point echoed by Crary who has said, “Technological consumption coincides with and becomes indistinguishable from strategies and effects of power. Certainly, for much of the twentieth century, the organization of consumer societies was never unconnected with forms of social regulation and subjugation, but now the management of economic behaviour is synonymous with the formation and perpetuation of malleable and assenting individuals.”¹⁹⁸ Morozov also recognises the risks of powers of behavioural modification being employed for profit. However, he candidly goes on to ask, “Will a post-neoliberal identity, receptive to ideas of solidarity, emerge on its own without a similar effort at behavioral modification? And should we categorically renounce behavioral modification in fighting global warming or sexism?”¹⁹⁹ This is a very important point. Many, it would seem, might agree to asymmetries of knowledge and power, including toward behavioural modification, if it works towards ends and means to which one assents—be them for equality or, say, successful vaccine uptake. But Zuboff, in asking, “who knows, who decides, who decides who decides?,” is suggesting the choice of means/ends may not be yours or someone you trust, and it may not necessarily be a democratic one.

The role of euphemism. Second, Zuboff alerts us to the role of euphemism in surveillance capitalism. In what she calls “*the problem of the two texts*,” there is in one, public-facing and full-of-promise text, where we are the authors and readers. And in the second, shadow text, “our experience is dragooned as raw material to be accumulated and analyzed as means to others’ market ends.”²⁰⁰ In a partial echo to Wu, Zuboff is

¹⁹⁷ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 375.

¹⁹⁸ Crary, 24/7, 42.

¹⁹⁹ Evgeny Morozov, “Capitalism’s New Clothes: Shoshana Zuboff’s new book on ‘surveillance capitalism’ emphasizes the former at the expense of the latter,” *The Baffler*, 4 February 2019: section XIII, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/capitalisms-new-clothes-morozov>.

²⁰⁰ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 186.

cautioning to not engage the front-facing product or service without also recognising other corporate objectives, of “digital dispossession,”²⁰¹ not immediately accessible. Zuboff argues the euphemism is, in part, misdirection. For example, the word “smart,” is a euphemism for rendition of human experience into data.²⁰²

Obscuring a shadow market behind euphemism is more problematic when the front-facing market, and its apologists, appear to be (or are) positively addressing real human needs and concerns. This can be seen in the developing “affective computing market,” estimated to be worth \$53.98 billion in 2021.²⁰³ This market uses machine learning to read emotions by looking at facial expressions, vocal intonation, and micro-expressions with sensors, cameras, processors, and storage devices. MIT Media Lab professor Rosalind Picard was one of the first to see its medical and therapeutic potential, eventually starting a company called Affectiva that she thought could, in part, use its knowledge to help autistic children. Picard was eventually pushed out from the company as the focus became on applying its powerful machine learning toward advertisements, on predictions for whether someone would purchase a particular product.²⁰⁴

Human emotions and needs are here used, with increased sophistication, for profit. For example, machine learning has shown that a “need for love” in users has been found to be a prediction for the likelihood of responding to advertising.²⁰⁵ Zuboff summarises her concern: “They dressed in the fashions of advocacy and emancipation, appealing to and exploiting contemporary anxieties, while the real action was hidden offstage.”²⁰⁶ Is this television simply a television? Is this Nest thermostat simply what is advertised? If we do not account for the hidden texts or markets in these platforms or other technologies, we

²⁰¹ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 99.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 238.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 287.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 288.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 277.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

may end up elevating the technologies, with their purported emancipatory benefits, to an unhelpful, almost mystical, level. This is Crary's point when he writes, "Once there is mystification and the attribution of quasi-magical capabilities to networks, it becomes like faith in a Ponzi scheme that will automatically pay off on behalf of the weak and oppressed. The myths of the egalitarian and empowering nature of this technology have been cultivated for a reason."²⁰⁷

The ideology of inevitabilism. The third feature of surveillance capitalism we will consider is what Zuboff calls the "ideology of *inevitabilism*," which is that "everything will be connected, knowable, and actionable in the near future,"²⁰⁸ and that opposition to the colonising ubiquity of information technology is simply futile. She writes, "Inevitability ideology works to equate surveillance capitalism and its instrumentarian power with nature: not a human construction but something more like a river or glacier, a thing that can be joined or endured."²⁰⁹ Zuboff, sees inevitabilism as concealing the priorities of surveillance capitalism. Zuboff documents evidence of what she understands as inevitabilism as a *ruse* to disempower discussion and dissent. From 2012 to 2015 she interviewed 52 data scientists and specialists in the IoT from 19 different companies. She summarises, "Nearly every interviewee regarded inevitability as a Trojan horse for powerful economic imperatives."²¹⁰ One senior systems architect told her, "The IoT is inevitable like getting to the Pacific Ocean was inevitable. It's manifest destiny. Ninety-eight percent of things in the world are not connected. So we're gonna connect them. It could be a moisture temperature that sits in the ground. It could be your liver.

²⁰⁷ Crary, 24/7, 121. This thesis will take up these matters in more depth, particularly through Borgmann's discussion of the promise of technology and his notion of the device paradigm. Mystification of technology is also taken up by David Noble in his work, *The Religion of Technology: the Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York: A.A. Knoph, 1998); see also, Wendell Berry's essay, "Faustian Economics," *Harper's Magazine*, 16 May 2008.

²⁰⁸ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 222-23.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 395.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

That's *your* IoT. The next step is what we do with the data. We'll visualize it, make sense of it, and monetize it. That's *our* IoT."²¹¹ Zuboff is not suggesting that everyone attempting to proselytise on behalf of a certain technological future (and industry) are aware of a ruse. Rather, her larger point seems to be that an ideology of inevitabilism "precludes choice and voluntary participation."²¹²

Surveillance capitalism as colonisation. The fourth and final feature or theme from Zuboff's telling of surveillance capitalism is her presentation of surveillance capitalism as colonisation. Karl Polanyi outlined three "commodity fictions": (1) human life reborn as "labour," (2) nature reborn as "land" or "real estate," and (3) exchange reborn as "money."²¹³ Zuboff argues a fourth fictional commodity has been declared, all human experience (private and public) is being reborn as "behavior," which is then translated into data and fabricated into prediction products to be sold.²¹⁴

Zuboff argues the model for claiming this virgin wood follows what historians call the "conquest pattern," inaugurated by Christopher Columbus and the Spanish Conquistadors from 4 December, 1492. There is the use of declarations, which John Searle describes as when "we make something the case by representing it as being the case."²¹⁵ The Spaniards also referred to the inevitability of their offensives,²¹⁶ using it as justification. They created edicts (*Requirimiento*) which were to be read to native peoples prior to taking them over. Zuboff points out this promise to treat fairly those who surrender was often cynically applied, with the conquerors mumbling the words into their beards while they laid in wait prior to attack.²¹⁷ The Spaniards used what was

²¹¹ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 225.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 227.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

unprecedented in the lives of the indigenous peoples as leverage, demanding subordination to authorities they could not conceive. In fact, the Taínos, of the pre-Columbian Caribbean islands, having no precedent for these bearded soldiers in armour, took them for gods and invited them in with elaborate hospitality ceremonies.²¹⁸ Zuboff argues surveillance capitalists are using our lack of precedent for these powerful technologies as a means towards pacification.

We have already explored Zuboff's unpacking of euphemism and inevitabilism which is part of surveillance capitalism's conquest pattern, and which gains oxygen from the naiveté of the people who are told what the future is, as if it is not under the direction of human actors in real time. The speed at which conquest proceeds, only adds to a sense of inevitabilism and helps keep legal and regulatory authorities behind. Facebook's internal motto until 2014 was, "move fast and break things." Eric Schmidt also expressed well the quick pace to scale when he wrote, "almost nothing, short of a biological virus, can scale as quickly, efficiently, or aggressively as these technology platforms, and this makes the people who build, control, and use them powerful too."²¹⁹ Toward inevitability, Google's Hal Varian has declared, "Everyone will expect to be tracked and monitored...continuous monitoring will be the norm."²²⁰ Similarly, a senior software engineer for a large IoT company said, "Now the real aim is ubiquitous intervention, action, and control...Real-time analytics translate into real-time action."²²¹ Regarding such a pattern of conquest, Bernard Stiegler is incredulous, saying, "Contrary to their claims, these new barbarians are *in no way radical innovators*."²²² Rather, "disruption amounts to nothing other than the...so-called 'libertarian' programme, which claims to

²¹⁸ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 12.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 257.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 293.

²²² Stiegler, *Age of Distraction*, 43.

absorb the social and the political into the technological and economic by crushing them.”²²³

There is a final point to be made on surveillance capitalism as colonisation, which is the role of “digital evangelism,”²²⁴ or proselytisation, which foreshadows the larger theological aim of this research. Part of the *Requirimiento* read to indigenous villagers before assailing them said, “There is but one God, one hope, and one King of Castile, who is Lord of these Countries.”²²⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez spoke to this when he said, “The conquest and colonization of the lands Columbus discovered were promptly presented as a missionary endeavour...Christian considerations were brought forward in order to justify the colonial enterprise.”²²⁶ Declarations about the status or classification of colonised persons were not simply justified by purely social, political or economic reasoning.

Gutiérrez writes,

One of the most renowned apologists of the *Conquista* and colonialization was Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. The heavy cannon in Sepúlveda’s arsenal was the argument that the Indians were natural slaves, inferior to the Europeans, their natural masters...The subjection of the Indians to the Spaniards, for Sepúlveda, was in conformity with human nature. Hence wars to achieve this subjection were fully justified. Furthermore, these wars were necessary in order to be able to evangelize.²²⁷

Theological justification for the proselytisation and colonisation of persons was provided by the colonisers’ own house theologians. And Gutiérrez argues “we have had a good many Sepúlvedas since then in the Americas.”²²⁸ This raises the question, if there is a new colonisation of the kind we are exploring, happening in real time, who are the contemporary *encomendero*’s house apologists and what is *their* message or justification? How are they, as (unwitting?) sycophants of surveillance capitalists, paving the way for

²²³ Stiegler, *Age of Disruption*, 41.

²²⁴ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 64.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

²²⁶ Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 194-95.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

pacification and exploitation of persons? Zuboff cites Orwell, who in a scathing review of James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution*, which had praised centralised planning in Germany and Russia in 1940, suggested that Burnham suffered cowardice and a worship of the powers of the day. Orwell said Burnham was obeying "the instinct to bow down before the conqueror of the moment, to accept the existing trend as irreversible."²²⁹ Zuboff's investigation of surveillance capitalism as colonisation prompts questions for how theological discourse today is disarming or disengaging criticism of neoliberal technological expansion through discourse on technological inevitabilism.²³⁰

Proposals for Resistance

In terms of Zuboff's proposals for mobilisation and resistance/reform, she is foremost concerned to assert *new* human rights. She follows Searle "that such elemental 'features of human life' rights are crystallized as formal human rights only at that moment in history when they come under systemic threat."²³¹ And what are the rights under threat again? These are: (1) the "right to the future tense" which is an "individual's ability to imagine, intend, promise, and construct a future."²³² And, (2) the "right to sanctuary," which is "the human need for a space of inviolable refuge."²³³ Both the right to the future tense and right to sanctuary are foundational assertions that guide the legal and regulatory changes necessary to arrest this form of rogue capitalism.

²²⁹ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 523.

²³⁰ Posthuman theology is one place for further investigation. Clearly naming/recognising these theologies could also provide an opportunity to assert an appropriate and relevant counter-theology. Also, toward this topic, see: Evan Selinger and Timothy Engström, "Moratorium on Cyborgs: Computation, Cognition, and Commerce," in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition and Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell), 2014.

²³¹ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 332.

²³² *Ibid.*, 20.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 21. Note: It is important to point out these rights are remarkably (curiously?) similar to the freedoms which Frischmann and Selinger outline in their 2018 book, *Re-Engineering Humanity*. In a section titled "Environmental Humanism" they argue for a *freedom from engineered determinism* (which corresponds to Zuboff's right to the future tense) and *freedom to be off* (which corresponds to a right to sanctuary). See: Brett Frischmann and Evan Selinger, *Re-Engineering Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 270.

Criticisms of Zuboff and Surveillance Capitalism

Zuboff's book has not been without criticism. First, Wu has pointed out some of the book's themes have already been developed elsewhere.²³⁴ Morozov has indicated something similar,²³⁵ and pointing out her resistance to engage with "alternative conceptions of that same phenomenon."²³⁶ Amidst an increasing number of scholars raising concern around a similar set of conditions,²³⁷ Zuboff appears interested to advance the early and definitive account.²³⁸

Second, Morozov has concerns that Zuboff's criticism does not permeate the larger conditions of capitalism, which have produced surveillance capitalism. While accepting her description of the state of play, he nevertheless finds Zuboff too wedded to the ideal of a sovereign consumer.²³⁹ He writes, "The central paradox of Zuboff's thought remains: human experience should be protected from becoming a fictitious commodity, so that it can be emancipated and enriched by other commodities."²⁴⁰ He also believes she overlooks capitalism's relentless pursuit of long term profit and power.²⁴¹ In other words, she condemns a mutant form of capitalism, whilst remaining altogether too sanguine, or uncritical, about capitalism itself.

²³⁴ Tim Wu, "Bigger Brother" review of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, by Shoshana Zuboff, *New York Review of Books* (9 April 2020), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/04/09/bigger-brother-surveillance-capitalism/?printpage=true>. Also see for example: Bruce Schneier, *Data and Goliath: The Hidden Battles to Collect Your Data and Control Your World*, 1st ed., New York: W.W. Norton, 2015.

²³⁵ Morozov, "Capitalism's New Clothes," section XIII. Morozov points out that behavioural surplus as a new form of appropriation by capitalists has been debated by cybernetics since the 1940s, including in 1974 by British cybernetician Stafford Beer who recognised the dangers of technologically sophisticated advertisers appropriating user feedback.

²³⁶ Morozov, "Capitalism's New Clothes," section VI.

²³⁷ For one recent example, see: Jathan Sadowski, *Too Smart: How Digital Capitalism is Extracting Data, Controlling Our Lives, and Taking Over the World*, Cambridge, (MA: MIT Press, 2020).

²³⁸ Morozov may have had a similar idea in mind. His own forthcoming book, *Freedom as a Service: The New Digital Feudalism and the Future of the City*, appears to be an alternative conception of a similar set of problems. <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780374280284/freedomasaservice>.

²³⁹ Morozov, "Capitalism's New Clothes," section VIII.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, section XIV.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, section VI.

Third, Morozov points out that Zuboff seems to presume that surveillance capitalism hurts everyone equally, when in reality, pensioners in Oslo, who are, by way of Norway's sovereign wealth fund, invested in surveillance capitalism, have reasons to appreciate these companies in a way that the landless poor in São Paulo might not.²⁴² This raises a good point about the entangled nature by which so many are already mixed up with finance capitalism and the industries in question.

Fourth, Zuboff has also been criticised for being sensational.²⁴³ Doctorow, in his quickly published response, *How to Destroy Surveillance Capitalism*, agrees with the reality of surveillance capitalism and believes Big Tech “poses unique challenges to our species and civilization.”²⁴⁴ He argues, however, that Zuboff ends up reinforcing a kind of tech exceptionalism as she takes too seriously their own sales literature²⁴⁵ and the powers of their behavioural modification. He distinguishes persuasive technologies and behavioural modification away from any kind of overt mind control which would deprive persons of free will.²⁴⁶ Doctorow, though, like Zuboff, argues the necessary assertion of human rights for the digital sphere.²⁴⁷ Wu does as well, but he is closer to Zuboff in understanding these rights as necessary opposite a dramatic and consequential asymmetry in power and knowledge by surveillance capitalists. He says, “The protection of human freedom can no longer be thought of merely as a matter of traditional civil rights, the rights to speech, assembly, and voting... What we need most urgently is something else: protection against widespread behaviour control and advanced propaganda techniques.”²⁴⁸ Wu believes that Zuboff has made two important contributions: she has illustrated the

²⁴² Morozov, “Capitalism’s New Clothes,” section XII.

²⁴³ Ibid., section II.; Wu, “Bigger Brother.”

²⁴⁴ Cory Doctorow, *How to Destroy Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Stonesong, 2020), 7.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 13.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

²⁴⁸ Wu, “Bigger Brother.”

relationship between capitalism and emerging systems of control and second, has provided, “a better and deeper understanding of what, in the future, it will mean to protect human freedom.”²⁴⁹

Even if, with Doctorow, we were to discount some of Zuboff’s most far-reaching claims, we are left with evidences of predatory and colonising practices through the sophisticated technologies described. However, unlike the Taínos, the frontier of this occupation appears as a rather bloodless, quiet, and often pleasant affair. This points to the need, in this project, for a better understanding of the larger culture of technology and persons relationship to it—something we will undertake in Chapters 3 and 4.

Questions for Theology

Before concluding this chapter, I will outline the theological considerations Zuboff’s work prompts.²⁵⁰ There are several: first, Zuboff will follow Langdon Winner to argue the lack of outrage at computerized surveillance is because we are in an enduring state of disorientation, and then affirms, “So let us establish our bearings.”²⁵¹ The establishing of bearings, for Zuboff, is to begin to comprehend the outlines of data exploitation and behavioural modification which is largely concealed from the user, as well as to struggle for certain freedoms which this form of capitalism impedes. The establishment of bearings fits with earlier theological prompts. What is less clear from Zuboff is what resources exist for the sheltering and rehabilitation of persons in order to accomplish reorientation. Presumably, there is no pause button for ongoing attention colonisation and surveillance capitalism. Wu, Alter and Williams provided opportunities to ask how theology might provoke or nurture certain values or higher goals, how it might

²⁴⁹Wu, “Bigger Brother.”

²⁵⁰ Eric Stoddart, in his ongoing theological critique of surveillance, takes up Zuboff’s work in: *The Common Gaze: Surveillance and the Common Good* (London: SCM Press, 2021).

²⁵¹ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 220.

help embed constraints, and strengthen persons and collectives opposite the conditions and goals of attention colonisation. Zuboff does not provide insights in this way. In girding her readers for a “fight for a human future at the new frontier of power” (to reference her book’s subtitle), she seems to leave the reader searching themselves for the will, fortitude and direction necessary. We might be prepared to vote for the rights she prescribes, but not necessarily to understand, on a more fundamental basis, why we should try. Why are we worth the effort? It is the absence of any theological prompt in her proposal that ends up, I believe, making the case for one. There is an uneasy sense that Zuboff’s account carries a kind of self-referentialism, that is toward a “cocoon of control and personalization.”²⁵² For theology, does the opposite hold? How does engaging life beyond powerful persuasive technologies and their operators actually animate and substantiate ourselves and others? This is consonant with our reflection from Alter’s work where behavioural addiction might be addressed by increased engagement with realities where fluency is weak.

Second, amidst the “collective drive toward total knowledge”²⁵³ pursued by surveillance capitalists, I am wondering in reply, what of a divestment of accumulation or a delimiting principle such as self-limitation and/or voluntary poverty? This is a further extension of Williams notion of a “library of limits.” What about a kind of elective poverty of the intellect and/or of being in the know? A poverty from devices? Could there be poverty as radical interruption to attention colonisation? Jonathan Crary has shown that sleep is itself a radical interruption to capitalism. He writes, “Because capitalism cannot limit itself, the notion of preservation or conservation is a systemic impossibility. Against this background, the restorative inertness of sleep counters the deathliness of all the

²⁵² Crary, 24/7, 89.

²⁵³ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 262.

accumulation, financialization, and waste that have devastated anything once held in common.”²⁵⁴ We might ask, how might a kind of voluntary poverty act as nullification for these conditions? Crary goes on, saying, “sleep...can always rehearse the outlines of what more consequential renewals and beginnings might be.”²⁵⁵ As capitalism carries forward, what are the spaces, here we are thinking again of poverty, that retard colonialism, places where it is possible to rehearse the outlines of greater renewal? And in connection with the previous point—a vow of poverty is at once a renouncement or disengagement with one world whilst simultaneously enhancing engagement with another.

Third, Zuboff speaks of life being “broken by rendition.”²⁵⁶ She writes that “unruly life is brought to heel, rendered as behavioural data and reimagined as a territory for browsing, searching, knowing, and modifying.”²⁵⁷ The idea of controlling the unruly is, for Zuboff, an attempt to ultimately smooth out the texture of human (and here we might add non-human) existence. It seems helpful for theology to think in a similar vein as to how friction or roughness, imperfection, and noise should be protected and valued here. We seek a theological insight that strengthens persons whilst simultaneously debilitating or weakening the hard rationality of surveillance capitalism. This is a kind of reordering which is also admitting low-grade chaos into the system.

Conclusion

We have now extensively outlined what this study believes are important accountings for both an attention economy (Wu, Alter, and Williams) and the colonisation of human experience in data extraction and behavioural modification by surveillance capitalists (Zuboff). Wu, Alter and Williams were all helpful for outlining the predatory

²⁵⁴ Crary, *24/7*, 128.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 269.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

and escalating nature of the attention industry and its greater market perfection in persuasive technologies. Williams has alerted us to industry priorities that are often divergent from citizens' goals and values, and, indeed, sometimes the very maturation of goals and values. Williams has argued for a liberation of human attention. However, this preoccupation with online attention captivation and trade has failed to fully consider how these practices could invariably aid in data extraction and behavioural modification, both on *and* offline. Zuboff, for her part, has shown the problem is larger than the attention economy and its captivating online environments. The problem is one of human experience as a new virgin wood, the fourth fictitious commodity. It is a problem of data accumulation that "reaches its full potential for quality only as it approximates totality,"²⁵⁸ or as a Google Street View project leader put it, "The challenge of deciding you're going to map the world is that you can't ever stop."²⁵⁹ The mapping and appropriation of human experience for rich data, unless impeded, extends into every corner of existence. Instrumentarian power, she shows, is readily converted into an instrumentarian society where human-machine symbiotics can be coordinated by those bearing powerful knowledge and decision-making freedoms. On the other hand, Zuboff, in her focus on surveillance and behaviour modification, will unhelpfully absolve certain companies that have, until now, advocated for the privacy of its users'/consumers' data (e.g., Apple or Netflix). She maintains less concern, it appears, for those persuasive technologies Wu, Alter, and Williams believe have, if not having made us addicted, are at least, in a highly engineered and incredibly sophisticated manner, are working to keep us adhered to their technological devices/interfaces for as long as possible. These mechanisms for binding, in the attention economy, are also often concealed from our awareness and may compromise

²⁵⁸ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 95.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

persons, and therefore could be understood as a symbiotic extension of the very kind of instrumentarian power Zuboff has outlined.

Together, the attention economy and surveillance capitalism can be understood under a larger and more helpful term for this project, *attention colonisation*. Attention colonisation is a powerful and concealed compromise of human attention and autonomy (individual and collective), whereby enterprises, on and offline, use sophisticated technologies to capture, maximise and shape time online with a given device, platform, or application, *as well as* to possibly manipulate or coerce behaviour offline. The consequence is to leave persons less sheltered, individually and socially, to stir up alternative value centres and more fully respond to colonisation.

Does the injury we have explored satisfy conditions of credible and recognisable ‘captivity and deprivation’ within a culture of technology today? In the introduction, I argued the injury should: (1) be interwoven and implicated within a range of contemporary social/technological concerns, (2) have identifiable actors, and (3), relate to a great number of citizens within an advanced technological society. I would argue that our detailed work in Chapter 2 has shown that attention colonisation provisionally²⁶⁰ accomplishes each of these. The investigation of the attention economy alone, with its cited personal and interpersonal injuries, has satisfied these criteria, and has only been magnified through Zuboff’s outline of surveillance capitalism. We will now assume attention colonisation, for this study, as a real form of injury, an ongoing suffering or oppression, deserving of theology’s consideration.

Why do I refer to this material condition as attention colonisation, rather than, more in line with Zuboff, the colonisation of human experience in toto? There are two reasons: first, while Zuboff does provide extensive evidence for an unfolding predictive products

²⁶⁰ I will explain my use of the term provisional in the introduction to Chapter 3.

market, with actions from certain corporate actors to nudge, herd and tune human behaviour toward decided outcomes, at present, the full manifestation of such project(s) is unrealised and, in places, speculative. Also, in addition to any future legislation, Big Tech itself has responded to some of the concerns over data capture and privacy, signalling interest, in certain cases, to self-police its own practices.²⁶¹ While Zuboff calls such methods “masterful rhetorical misdirection,”²⁶² amidst a fast-moving political and regulatory environment it seems precarious to join this project simply and entirely with surveillance capitalism. Political struggles, it is reasonable to assume, will be waged over privacy and data dispossession. However, there is no credible sign that sophisticated attention capture, by whatever means, will abate.

Secondly, this project finds the notion of attention as more theologically fruitful for the themes which have been raised.²⁶³ With Williams, we can think that when we are *paying* attention, we are paying in terms of the opportunity cost for that which was partially or essentially foreclosed. Attention, it seems, prompts one to draw contrasts between that which consumes or captivates, with the lives individuals and communities may have lived—including those other beings/things with which we may have more fully engaged. This opens a door for considering worthy alternatives, however that is precisely sorted. Certainly, behavioural modification, on and offline through the economies of scope and action Zuboff outlines, does indeed incite the question about what lives would have been lived, had lives not sustained a level of manipulation being described in surveillance capitalism. There is no intention through my use of the term attention colonisation to

²⁶¹ Justin Schuh. “Building a More Private Web: A Path Towards Making Third Party Cookies Obsolete,” Google, 14 Jan. 2020, <https://blog.chromium.org/2020/01/building-more-private-web-path-towards.html>.

²⁶² Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 53.

²⁶³ Attention colonisation is both broad enough to allow consideration of the larger technological culture, as well as provides an appropriate limit to the scope of this work. It is also an established and ongoing concern in contemporary studies of technology.

jettison this aspect, actually the contrary. Without surveillance capitalism, again we may be tempted to think the extent of the problem is simply online with the sophisticated employment of engagement techniques. The term attention colonisation, however, alerts one to a larger set of issues which directs human attention in a wide variety of settings, with varying diminishment of agency. Attention as a kind of purposeful engagement, whether in the form of alertness to increasingly powerful machine/social confluence, or relationships to possible alternative poles or centres of meaning privileged by a liberation theology of technology, has emerged as a central concern and will later frame my work in Part II of this thesis.

Finally, in the course of this chapter, I have flagged certain questions and opportunities that are prompted for theology. The authors we have investigated (Williams and Zuboff most clearly) have been consistent in understanding the problems of attention colonisation as a matter for liberation. There have been issues raised, such as asymmetries in knowledge and power and conditions of oppression or colonisation, which are consistent with concerns of classic liberation theology. There are others that may comport with Latin American liberation theology but also reflect the specific circumstances we are investigating. These include: (1) theology and the church's role toward orientation (i.e., sanctuary, behavioural architecture, and alternative value centres) for those with injured capacities for attention, (2) asserting certain values (or rights) for human beings including attentional capacities and autonomy from dehumanising attention colonisation, (3) engagement with realities where fluency remains weak, as well as (4), the role of voluntary poverties or constraint as interruption to colonisation in this context. All of these considerations still bear the essential question of what precisely liberation is *from* and *for* in our context. We will carry these early understandings and questions forward, adding to

them in Chapters 3 and 4, before a final drawing together in Chapter 5 as preparation for the theological Part II of this thesis.

We now turn to Chapters 3 and 4 where we will attempt to understand and situate attention colonisation within a broader theoretical framework, beginning with the key concepts of our principal interlocutor, Albert Borgmann. It would be conceivable to move from where we are now to direct engagement with early Latin American liberation theology. We have pointed out already that Williams and Zuboff, especially, have framed the issues in emancipatory terms, including familiar socio-economic and political concerns and approaches. But, as it will be seen, Borgmann (as well as Andrew Feenberg) will illuminate an important larger understanding of the conditions of a technological age that will inform and nuance this study, including the reform possibilities in the designs and uses of devices and those things yet undercolonised in the ongoings of techno-capitalism.

Chapter 3

Albert Borgmann: Culture of Technology and Opportunities for Reform

I. The Importance of Borgmann/Feenberg for this Project

In Chapter 2 this study sought to determine whether conditions of *captivity and deprivation*, in keeping with a limited description from Albert Borgmann, were recognisable within our advanced technological society. It was demonstrated that these conditions were provisionally located in what has now been described as *attention colonisation*. Why do I moderate this location as provisional? This is because the descriptions and analysis from Chapter 2 have simultaneously addressed important questions and invariably raised new ones. Let us consider three areas in which this is the case. First, in applying the insights of James Williams, we can now understand that, at least in the narrowest sense, liberation could be considered as being *from* attention colonisation. Persons are, therefore, liberated *for* (or toward) the kind of life they might have otherwise pursued had their human attention and experience not been mitigated and plundered in the manner which has been suggested. Recall that one of Williams' three attentional lights was "starlight," whereby we are able to orient or guide our lives by our higher values and goals.²⁶⁴ To continue with a metaphor of night sky, attention colonisation is analogous to a kind of light pollution which precludes or inhibits our ability to orient and navigate by more easily recognised points in a night sky. While understanding attention colonisation in this way does provide a provisional answer to the liberation *from/for* questions, it also prompts further questions such as: are there certain diminished goals or values (stars as it were) that have *more* meaning or purchase for citizens in a culture of technology? Certainly not all celestial sources are found the same.

²⁶⁴ Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, 49.

Similarly, if the aforementioned light pollution *was* restricted or abated, should the question of what constitutes the good life simply remain open? Zuboff has argued for the assertion of a “people’s right to a human future.”²⁶⁵ Similar to Williams, she appears to see this human future as based, optimally, on a higher degree of human agency and protection from certain predatory encroachment. Is there nothing more to assert for the human, then, in this context? And, perhaps most importantly, what is meant by a broader culture of technology, anyways? How does understanding such an environment then inform or shape collective responses to attention colonisation?

Secondly, attention colonisation carries a certain relation to classic liberation theology with its insistence on concretising factors which animate and/or exacerbate dehumanisation or marginalisation. Zuboff was unambiguous to this point when she states, “*We hunt the puppet master, not the puppet.*”²⁶⁶ By this she means that she resists being deluded by such things as rhetoric (e.g., inevitabilism) that obscures the actions and practices of specific groups of people and thereby ensconces those actors from answering for specific decisions at specific points in history. As Zuboff is trained toward the actors, she then understands that, always, “technology is an expression of other interests.”²⁶⁷ But is this a sufficient account of technology, that it is always and simply a proxy for other interests, be them economic or political? One is left to wonder how persuasive technologies and the pattern and logic of surveillance capitalism relate to a larger age of technology in which we find ourselves. We have heard Morozov’s critique that Zuboff, in taking up and objectifying this emergent rogue form of capitalism, invariably attempts to preserve a central sovereignty for the consumer and does not account for other persistent commodification, as it is not consistent with her project’s purview. This could indicate she

²⁶⁵ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 55.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

has not sufficiently nested or contextualised her concerns within a larger conceptual framework. Alternately, we have heard Williams suggest that ultimately, in the case of the attention economy, there is no one to blame. I have already indicated this position is unhelpful toward materialising or unmasking hidden markets. But, nevertheless, it is worthwhile to ask, could Williams be pointing up a larger set of systemic circumstances that should themselves be better understood?

Third, and again relatedly, the actors that Zuboff identifies as surveillance capitalists are wielding, she argues, unprecedented and asymmetric knowledge, wealth, and power. This asymmetry between the consumer/user and the attention merchants and/or surveillance capitalists has raised alarm. The inhibiting, if not outright capture, of human agency in attention colonisation has, I believe, been demonstrated. However, what is not yet clear, in this study, is the degree of *complicity* that the consumer/user, nevertheless, bears within these asymmetric relationships. Attention colonisation, I have said, appears to be a rather bloodless, quiet, and pleasant affair. In other words, the asymmetry of knowledge and power in the context of attention colonisation is fairly straightforward, however, the precise outline for what is oppression versus what is complicity, in such a context, remains entirely too vague.

Here we have explored several areas where the progress from Chapter 2 has simultaneously raised further important questions for this project. What is the more fundamental concern around which the aforementioned questions revolve? I believe it is that we seek here a broader, and more nuanced, conception of our contemporary technological milieu and the human relation to it. Therefore, keeping in mind the above-mentioned questions, a broader conception would be helpful to include: (1) key features of a larger culture of technology, (2) key problems within this larger technological reality, including the question of the nature of oppression, complicity, and agency, and also, (3),

notions about the nature of a good life, and methods and opportunities for reform or drastic action toward such a life. Such a theoretical framework should develop, in a less provisional sense, toward one of the most significant and consistent challenges for a ‘liberation theology of technology,’ which is, again, what broadly is liberation *from* in a culture of technology and what should liberation be *for*?

Given the reliance this interdisciplinary project has on a theoretical model for contemporary technology and human imbrication therein, it is crucial to investigate these themes in a careful and substantive manner. I will principally do this work over the course of two chapters, 3 and 4, before I draw together my working conception in Chapter 5 to conclude Part I of this study. Chapter 3 will focus on unpacking, in both a detailed expository and analytical manner, the most salient ideas from this project’s principal technology theorist and interlocutor, Albert Borgmann. As this study cannot rely on the views of only one figure, Chapter 4 will then directly confront these developed understandings from Borgmann with the pointed arguments of, especially, Andrew Feenberg, the philosopher of technology who critiques Borgmann in a most precise and helpful manner. The result in Chapter 5 will be a lean working conception of our contemporary technological culture that is fit for purpose within a larger liberation theology, and is informed by the conditions of attention colonisation.

Prior to unpacking Borgmann, it is important to first acknowledge, at some length, why this thesis should yield two chapters to philosophy of technology (or perhaps most accurately, philosophy cum theology of technology).²⁶⁸ There are reasons which are both

²⁶⁸ Regarding “philosophy cum theology of technology,” Borgmann, a chief interlocutor for this project, is a technological theorist that shows awareness/sympathy to Christian discourse. As will be unpacked in Part II, Borgmann’s understanding of ‘advanced poverty’ is based on his reading of poverty in the Gospels and the technological conditioning of biblical poverty today. His book, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology*, is more explicit in its theological concern and his ideas there are traceable to his earliest writings, which we begin to lay out here in Chapter 3. Feenberg, for his part, is a key challenge to particular ideas of Borgmann and therefore critical for inclusion in Part I. This will become clear in Chapters 4 and 5.

in keeping with the history and method of liberation theology as well as are important for understanding the complex and unhelpful ambiguity of large-scale technological revolutions. Regarding the latter, Alexis de Tocqueville, in 1835 after visiting Manchester, England, birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, relayed a conflicted account of what he witnessed. He wrote, “From this foul drain the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilise the whole world. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilisation works its miracles, and civilised man is turned back almost into a savage.”²⁶⁹ Tocqueville’s description includes a dark, regressive account of Manchester’s citizens (“foul,” “filthy,” brutish,” “savage”) which is more in keeping with Blake’s “dark Satanic Mills.”²⁷⁰ But it is the tension and ambiguity between the harsh conditions for human beings with an alternatively positive progressive language (i.e., “fertilise the whole world,” “pure gold,” complete development,” “miracles”) which suggests a need for further and careful reflection.

Borgmann, himself, notes the magnitude of radical changes and transformations happening in the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution that prompted certain theorists and critics (e.g., Carlyle, Marx, Nietzsche) to “articulate the fundamental shift in the human condition clearly and precisely.”²⁷¹ A clear example of this, it seems, is from Friedrich Engels, who in his 1845 *The Condition of the Working Class in England* wrote, “The only difference between the old-fashioned slavery and the new is that while the former was openly acknowledged the latter is disguised. The worker *appears* to be free, because he is not bought and sold outright. He is sold piecemeal by the day, the week, or

²⁶⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence and K. P. Mayer (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), 107-8.

²⁷⁰ William Blake, “Jerusalem,” Poetry Foundation, accessed 4 May 2020, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54684/Jerusalem-and-did-those-feet-in-ancient-time>.

²⁷¹ Albert Borgmann, “Is the Internet the Solution to the Problem of Community?,” in *Community in the Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice*, ed. Andrew Feenberg and Darin Barney (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 53.

the year. Moreover he is not sold by one owner to another, but is forced to sell himself in this fashion. He is not the slave of a single individual, but of the whole capitalist class.”²⁷²

Engels is noting a shift in the human condition amid complex and surreptitious circumstances. He argues the mill worker *appears* to be free but is not *actually*, that property-holding Industrialists are *in fact* a class of slave lords. Beyond the contradictions noted by Tocqueville, Engels is arguing for a reality not yet fully recognised.

Don Ihde sees in the Industrial Revolution’s age of large machines the advent of a new sort of philosophical reflection. He notes three important ideas of Karl Marx that relate to Industrial Age technology: *praxis*; *material modes of production*; and *alienation*.²⁷³ While Marx is focused mainly on socio-economic and political analysis, he is also raising technology as a phenomenon to the foreground.²⁷⁴ From both Engels and Marx, there is an effort to undertake what has been called the task of all great philosophers, which is to explain “what is distinctive, and distinctively awful, about the historical moment in which they find themselves.”²⁷⁵ But if the materiality of large machines (i.e., power looms, steam engines, factories, and smokestacks), of broken workers, and conspicuous wealth prompted careful reflection and interpretative analysis from Marx and Engels, how should today’s own present technological revolution, and its impact for persons, be traced and understood? Powerful technology systems, as we have seen in the last chapter, are very often woven into the fabric of everyday life, with their inner workings opaque to comprehension and scrutiny, and owners/operators/shareholders distant and marginally accountable. If George Orwell, touring the communities of northern England in the 1930s, was able to directly *encounter* and describe the *texture* of

²⁷² Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, ed. and trans. W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 92-93.

²⁷³ Don Ihde, *Philosophy of Technology: An Introduction* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 29-31.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁷⁵ Garcia, *The Life Intense*, ix.

poverty-stricken, working-class life resulting from industrialisation,²⁷⁶ is it today possible to trace what is “distinctive and distinctively awful” in a culture of advanced technology in Manchester, or London, or across the West? Chapter 2 explored or traced what might be considered contemporary “wounds” from attention colonisation. However, at this point in this project, the chosen tools of analysis should be suited to the questions stated at the outset, which indeed require a broader and more nuanced conception of our contemporary technological milieu and the human relation to it.

Albert Borgmann and Andrew Feenberg are both prominent philosophers in what has been called the “empirical turn” generation in philosophy of technology.²⁷⁷ These thinkers have been proceeding beyond the classical philosophers of technology (Heidegger, Hans Jonas, Ellul) which were occupied more with “the historical and transcendental conditions that made modern technology possible than with the real changes accompanying the development of a technology culture.”²⁷⁸ Instead, in the assessment of Hans Achterhuis, the empirical turn generation have been interested to: (1) open the black box of technologies, to analyse their “concrete development and formation,”²⁷⁹ (2) to not treat technology as a monolith,²⁸⁰ and (3) to begin speaking about the co-production of technology and society,²⁸¹ that is, a more intimate interweaving of culture and technology.²⁸²

It is also the case, though, that Borgmann and Feenberg outline a certain type of ontology, what Borgmann calls “a vision of reality in its decisive features.”²⁸³ And both

²⁷⁶ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2001), vi.

²⁷⁷ Hans Achterhuis, “Introduction: American Philosophers of Technology,” in *American Philosophy of Technology: The Empirical Turn*, ed. Hans Achterhuis, trans. Robert P. Crease (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 6.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁸³ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 8.

scholars are sensitive to philosophy being self-enclosed, arguing rather that philosophy should engage in what Feenberg calls “live issues.”²⁸⁴ This, he suggests, is in contrast to much of contemporary philosophy which “has worked very hard to become a technical discipline that no one should be interested in and this effort has been rewarded.”²⁸⁵ Borgmann confers, from Rorty, “Philosophers, not wanting to be sages, and failing to be scientists, turned into lawyers.”²⁸⁶ And while the empirical turn, alternately described as postphenomenology, has returned philosophy of technology and culture to concrete practices and developments, it is, for both Borgmann and Feenberg important that philosophy (contrary to some impulses of its analytical counterparts) retain its basis in human experience. Feenberg says, “Philosophy has discovered, beginning in...the nineteenth century, the realm of human experience as its realm. This is what philosophy can talk about that can’t be turned into a natural science.”²⁸⁷ In summary then, both Borgmann and Feenberg are empirically-oriented (postphenomenological) in some contrast with classical philosophers of technology, whilst at the same time not completely surrendering a phenomenological privilege in philosophy, the human ability to articulate a vision of reality as it is and could or should be.

I stated earlier that reasons for utilising philosophy of technology for a liberation theology of technology are both to keep with the history and method of liberation theology as well as to understand the complex and unhelpful ambiguity of large-scale technological revolutions. The latter part of this has now been somewhat elaborated on. I will now take up the former. Liberation theology, beginning with Gustavo Gutiérrez, has argued it is not

²⁸⁴ Andrew Feenberg, “Mansfield Center’s Ethics and Public Affairs Program: Panel Discussion: Borgmann, Feenberg, Mitcham,” University of Montana, filmed 23 March 2015, video of panel discussion, 13:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsyOFSpFRiQ>.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 15:22.

²⁸⁶ Borgmann, “Mansfield Center’s Ethics and Public Affairs Program: Panel Discussion: Borgmann, Feenberg, Mitcham,” University of Montana, filmed 23 March 2015, video of panel discussion, 34:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsyOFSpFRiQ>.

²⁸⁷ Feenberg, in “Mansfield Center,” 49:50.

enough to simply point out the suffering in our midst, but rather to insist on understanding *why* people are suffering. He writes, “As a complex human condition, poverty can only have complex causes. We must not be simplistic. We must doggedly plunge to the root, to the underlying causes of the situation.”²⁸⁸ While Gutiérrez’ reliance on Marx for critical aspects of his social and structural analysis were unequivocal in *A Theology of Liberation*,²⁸⁹ it is also true that Gutiérrez recognised other tools were possible and necessary. He later wrote, “The tools used in an analysis of social reality vary with time and with the particular effectiveness they have demonstrated when it comes to understanding this reality and proposing approaches to the solution of problems.”²⁹⁰ More recently, liberationists have argued the inclusion of, for example, literature and philosophy, as well as critical theory,²⁹¹ in what could be considered a further extension of Gutiérrez’ appeal.

But what is the threshold criteria for such a discipline or tool of analysis? There was an earlier indication of this in Chapter 2 when I suggested any injury being investigated should not suffer a mystery of origins but rather maintain empirical and historical priorities. Similarly, I want to argue here that to maintain fidelity to the basic orientation of early Latin American liberation theology, any analysis being applied must begin from, and be in commerce with, the actual, physical, concrete experiences of the communities being considered. Gutiérrez consistently criticises any intellectual undertaking separated from experience. Regarding theology he writes, “One of the best ways to refute a theology is to look at its practical consequences, not its intellectual

²⁸⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Option for the Poor,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 239.

²⁸⁹ Gutiérrez, *A Theory of Liberation*, 9.

²⁹⁰ Gutiérrez, “Option for the Poor,” 238.

²⁹¹ Michelle Gonzales, “Latino/a Theology: Doing Theology *Latinamente*,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 41, no.1 (Spring 2002): 70, accessed 26 April 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6385.00100>.

arguments.”²⁹² Also, “the mission of the Church cannot be defined in the abstract. Its historical and social coordinates, its here and now, have a bearing not only on the adequacy of its pastoral methods. They also should be at the very heart of theological reflection.”²⁹³ Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, in his 2004 book with Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On the Side of Poor: The Theology of Liberation*, acknowledges the basis in the here and now as the crucial essence of praxis. He says, “Praxis...involves a person’s holistic encounter with reality and his or her participation in the process of reality’s social and historical realization...As someone participates intelligently and creatively in the process of reality, that individual’s intellect is defined by reality as the principle of comprehension.”²⁹⁴

So, is philosophy of technology, particularly scholars from the empirical turn generation, such as Borgmann and Feenberg, sufficiently oriented toward praxis to meet this criterion? Based on what we have just outlined, this would seem the case. Ihde is also likely to confer with this when he acknowledges in Feenberg’s work an appreciation for the dominance of praxis philosophical systems in philosophy of technology, be it Marxism and critical theory, phenomenology, and pragmatism.²⁹⁵ And Marion Hourdequin has suggested Borgmann remains “firmly connected to the issues and concerns facing real people in contemporary life” and that he “exchanges the abstractness typical of mainstream Anglo-American philosophy for a theoretically-informed but practically-grounded philosophy that takes seriously both popular culture and the mundane aspects of everyday life.”²⁹⁶ And while the empirical turn can be interpreted as a postmodern rejection of

²⁹² Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 196.

²⁹³ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 266.

²⁹⁴ Gerald Ludwig Müller, “Liberation Theology in Context,” in *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation*, trans. Robert A. Krieg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 61-62.

²⁹⁵ Don Ihde, “*Technosystem: The Social Life of Reason* by Andrew Feenberg (Review),” *Technology and Culture* 56, no. 2 (April 2018): 506-8. <http://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/697260>.

²⁹⁶ Marion Hourdequin, “Reclaiming the Mundane: Comments on Albert Borgmann’s *Real American Ethics*,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 21 (2008): 65, <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10806-007-9063-8>.

phenomenology with any claim to access genuine reality,²⁹⁷ it can also be seen as a “turn toward things,”²⁹⁸ a commitment to the concrete situation of technological designers, designs, and users. For Gutiérrez, the concrete reality of the poor and marginalised was the entry point for theological reflection. For both Borgmann and Feenberg, their reflections seem similarly sourced from concrete circumstances. This is not to somehow overstate the compatibility of classic liberation theology and this particular strand of philosophy of technology. Rather, I am arguing that the conditions explored in Chapter 2 and the resulting questions we have delineated at the outset seem suited to a form of analysis provided by Borgmann and Feenberg and these tools for analysis bear at least some continuity with the history and method of classic liberation theology.

II. Principal Views of Albert Borgmann

How should we understand technology and what is the human being’s relationship to it? In order for this project to take up a kind of conception, we will begin by unpacking the fundamental ideas of Albert Borgmann, taken predominantly from his most important 1984 treatise, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life (TCCL)*. While Borgmann has since published four books and numerous articles, Borgmann has not significantly revised his thinking and stated as recently as 2010 that in *TCCL*, “I got it basically right.”²⁹⁹ To best capture Borgmann’s thinking, this chapter will work together Borgmann’s essential arguments from *TCCL* along with a number of articles, chapters, and secondary sources. The remaining chapter will address the above-named pivotal topics in the following sections: (1) the nature of our technological reality through its key features,

²⁹⁷ Peter-Paul Verbeek, “Postphenomenology of Technology,” in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition: An Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Sharff and Val Dusek, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 561-72.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 571.

²⁹⁹ Albert Borgmann, “Interview with Albert Borgmann,” interview by Laureano Ralón, *Figure/Ground*, 16 August 2010, <http://figureground.org/interview-with-albert-borgmann/>.

(2) the key problems within this technological reality, (3) the question of oppression, complicity and agency, and (4) methods and entry for reform.

The Nature of Our Technological Reality

Borgmann defines technology, in a narrow engineering sense, as “an ensemble of machineries and procedures.”³⁰⁰ But technology is also, in a wider sense, the dominant and characteristic manner in which we (advanced technological societies) take up the world.³⁰¹ It is this second sense, technology as culture or cultural force, that Borgmann’s work is focused. What then is the characteristic way that we take up the world? This is what Borgmann calls the *device paradigm*. The device paradigm is “a basic pattern or paradigm that has been serving us since the beginning of the modern era as a blueprint or template for the transformation of the physical and social universe.”³⁰² This basic pattern is linked to the promise of technology. The promise of technology is “to bring the forces of nature and culture under control, to liberate us from misery and toil, and to enrich our lives.”³⁰³ Liberation and enrichment is further joined by a principal of technological availability which means technology should not normally impose burdens on us, rather the liberation and enrichment has “been rendered instantaneous, ubiquitous, safe, and easy.”³⁰⁴ The promise of technology, liberation and enrichment, has been unquestionably transformative, with significant positive transformation for human beings. Borgmann writes,

Liberation is more prominent in areas such as health and safety. We are free from the threat of dying from diphtheria or tuberculosis. We can confidently expect to live into our eighties. Starvation won’t knock on our door, and there is no danger of our freezing to death. Richness rules our enjoyment of food, information, and entertainment. You can have oranges from distant places, lettuce in winter, and exotic dishes from anywhere. If you are curious about life in your hometown or the fall of Rome, Google

³⁰⁰ Albert Borgmann, “Technology as a Cultural Force: For Alena and Griffin,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 31, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 352, <http://doi.org/10.1353/cjs.2006.0050>.

³⁰¹ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 3, 35.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

will get you the information. Any evening you can watch any of hundreds of movies from the comfort of your couch.³⁰⁵

According to Borgmann, then, what is the outline of this device rule or pattern in our culture, which works to liberate us from misery and toil and to enrich our lives? The device is the result of a process whereby “the full significance of a thing is reduced to one function which is then secured as a commodity on the basis of some machinery.”³⁰⁶

Central heating is one demonstration of the device paradigm—a device which replaced the home’s pretechnological hearth. Centralised heat is the commodity that is provided and it is built on technologies (machinery) concealed from the home’s occupant. Computers, televisions, quick service restaurants, dams, transportation systems, and high rises all reflect the dominant device paradigm. Technological expertise manifesting in specialised occupations of various “helping professions” also reflects the device paradigm as the out-sourced expertise is a technical privilege of the specialised, with the commodity being whatever is on offer.³⁰⁷ By Borgmann’s understanding, even contemporary political systems have come to reflect a kind of meta-device, as the political machineries are largely inaccessible and the commodities being acquired are certain social benefits.³⁰⁸

The pattern of technology, in the ongoing creation of devices, “has led to more and more separation of functions, i.e., to vertical cuts in the web of pretechnological culture.”³⁰⁹ The device paradigm disengages, by way of isolating a certain function, that which was previously embedded in a deeper context. The pretechnological hearth, for example, was more than simply a device to deliver heat. The hearth was a “center of warmth, of light, and of daily practices.”³¹⁰ Roman families, for example, believed the

³⁰⁵ Borgmann, “Technology as a Cultural Force,” 355.

³⁰⁶ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 136.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

hearth was where the housegods resided and was where marriage was sanctified. By comparison, central heating today carries a much narrower meaning, principally to provide heat.

It is reasonable to detect here some regret in Borgmann's description of the device paradigm and its effects on the quality of contemporary life. To be fair to his conception of the device paradigm, though, Borgmann is clear that he believes "the device paradigm is perfect in its way."³¹¹ That "the device paradigm requires neither intrinsic reform nor global replacement. ...The general infrastructure, e.g., of communication, transportation, and health should provide the instantaneity, ubiquity, safety, and ease that only advanced technological devices can provide."³¹² Liberation from sicknesses and death and enrichment away from ignorance have been unquestionably important. As Nick Bostrom has said, "Had Mother Nature been a real parent, she would have been in jail for child abuse and murder."³¹³ The efforts to sustain and enhance life over against misery and death are obvious goods. Borgmann also believes those today that would advocate and attempt a kind of bucolic pretechnological life whilst also appropriating the benefits of certain technologies are themselves being "parasitic, on the work and good will of people conversant with science and savvy about technology, the kind of people who use science and technology to track and slow global warming, to protect wilderness areas, to design and manufacture tents and backpacks, pots and cookers, food and clothing."³¹⁴ He calls romantic attempts at a pretechnological life as "idyllic, imperilled, and irresponsible."³¹⁵ And on a more pragmatic note, Borgmann sees "[t]he machineries of life in a

³¹¹ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 220.

³¹² Albert Borgmann, "Reply to My Critics," in *Technology and the Good Life?*, ed. Eric Higgs, Andrew Light, and David Strong (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 364.

³¹³ Nick Bostrom, "In Defense of Posthuman Dignity," in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition: An Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Sharff and Val Dusek, 2nd ed. (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 499.

³¹⁴ Albert Borgmann, "Cyberspace, Cosmology, and the Meaning of Life," *Ubiquity*, vol. 8 (February 2007), <https://ubiquity.acm.org/article.cfm?id=1232403>.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

technological society have been configured into an interlocking system, and if we want to hold on to anything like the physical welfare and cognitive scope it affords, its basic machinery must be kept intact.”³¹⁶ These statements help provide some buttress against the accusation that Borgmann stands against technology, does not appreciate its utility for progress, and carries nostalgia for a time for which it is impossible to return. We will now consider five important themes useful for further understanding Borgmann’s view of our technological reality.

Hiddenness. If Borgmann is correct that this culture of technology takes up the world in a patterned and characteristic way, which he terms the device paradigm, and “the rise and rule of this pattern” is “the most consequential event of the modern period,”³¹⁷ then why has this most consequential event not been more widely understood and discussed? For Borgmann, there at least a few different reasons for this. First, he argues, “Concrete, everyday life is always and, it seems, rightly taken for granted. It is the common and obvious foreground of our lives that is understood by everyone. Therefore it is almost systematically and universally skipped in philosophical and social analysis.”³¹⁸ Second, according to Borgmann, the promise of technology has both fed and cloaked the pattern of technology.³¹⁹ Beginning in the early Enlightenment and onward, “The promise presents the character of the technological enterprise in broad and ambiguous outline, i.e., as the general procurement of liberty and prosperity in the principled and effective manner that is derived from modern science.”³²⁰ But, importantly, this promise has been invoked not only for considerable technological feats but also for “frivolous comfort.”³²¹ In other words, the promise conflates consequential with more trivial projects and the broad, vague

³¹⁶ Borgmann, “Reply to My Critics,” 365.

³¹⁷ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 3.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

³²¹ *Ibid.*

promise provides a sort of cover for a myriad of technological goods and services. The reflexive cooperation with this vague promise can inhibit a questioning of the technological way of life. Third, technology is understood by the culture as the manner to which we reach what we value, so the values are often argued about but the way of technology itself is not. Borgmann writes, “No matter how the question of values is raised and settled, the pattern of technology is never in question. Technology comes into play as the indispensable and unequalled procurement of the means that allow us to realize our preferred values.”³²² Furthermore, Borgmann believes that societal problems are thought to be extrinsic to technology and often blamed on social injustice, political irresolution, or environmental limitations.³²³ In fact, Borgmann will argue that much of our approach to these issues is already preformed by technology. Fourth, Borgmann does not consider the pattern of technology as exclusively dominant.³²⁴ It is conceivable that a deterministic view of technology as a completely hegemonic force would be harder to hide. But Borgmann, as we will see, holds that there is considerable cooperation or complicity between persons and technology.

If the pattern of technology is hidden or often overlooked, there is another important concealment, that being the machinery side of the device. One recalls that the device paradigm, in Borgmann’s view, repeatedly creates devices which have two aspects, the background machinery and the foreground commodity. The narrow stacking of available commodities requires that the machineries be “unobtrusive, i.e., concealed, dependable, and foolproof.”³²⁵ There are a couple effects, for Borgmann, from this hiddenness of the machineries. First, machineries increasingly resist “appropriation

³²² Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 80.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

through care, repair, the exercise of skill, and bodily engagement.”³²⁶ Second, the context to the machinery remains anonymous. “The machinery of the device does not of itself disclose the skill and character of the inventor and producer, it does not reveal a region and particular orientation within nature and culture.”³²⁷ The prevention of engagement and the anonymity of the original context makes machineries essentially unfamiliar.³²⁸ What is the net effect of the concealment of machineries in these ways? It allows the user to consume the commodity “without the encumbrance of or the engagement with a context.”³²⁹ Commodities are then, at the very least, obfuscating the relatedness of the world and inhibiting wider engagement with context, or as Borgmann puts it, this device paradigm “detaches us from the persons, things, and practices that used to engage and grace us in their own right.”³³⁰ What Borgmann means by gracing us in their own right will be taken up shortly. It should also be noted here that this idea of the obfuscation of and detachment from, in particular, persons, will emerge as a matter of considerable importance for this project.

Commodification. If the pattern of technology and machinery end of the device are oriented toward concealment, the conspicuous end purpose is the commodity. Borgmann believes “we can capture the comfort and commodiousness of these goods by calling them commodities.”³³¹ Borgmann distinguishes between two types of commodification: economic and moral (also called cultural) commodification. He defines economic commodification as “moving a good or service from without the market into the market.”³³² Moral commodification is “the detachment of a good or service from its

³²⁶ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 48.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

³³¹ Borgmann, “Technology as a Cultural Force,” 356.

³³² Albert Borgmann, “The Here and Now: Theory, Technology, and Actuality,” *Philosophy & Technology* 24 (2011): 14, <http://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-010-0002-7>.

context of engagement with a place, a time, and a community”³³³ and “made available in a reduced form that in the common cultural understanding is thought to be less cumbersome and more enjoyable.”³³⁴ Moral commodification always imposes a societal loss but often the moral gain outweighs this loss. Borgmann cites the example of the loss of candles as a source of domestic light. While the widespread craft of candle making and certain sensitivity to the seasons was lost, there was a more substantial gain in fire safety and increase in the scope of household activity.³³⁵ Economic and moral commodities can often overlap but not always. For both economic and moral commodities, Borgmann finds them objectionable namely “when they provide no such gain or needlessly crowd in on contexts of engagement...the frivolous commodities or their excessive use.”³³⁶ Taken then in its entirety, Borgmann states, “We have constructed a large and complex machine that delivers effortless experiences.”³³⁷

While, as we will see in the next chapter, Andrew Feenberg resists the reduction of all technological systems and artefacts to commodities (including the internet), Borgmann sees also in the internet the same basic pattern. He writes,

But the most intriguing promise of the Internet is...to provide what appears to be the best of two worlds—the ease and the riches of commodification and the profound fulfilment of a final community. What happens in fact is that commodification reduces ourselves and those we encounter on the Internet to glamorous and attractive personae. Commodification becomes self-commodification, but shorn of context, engagement, and obligation.³³⁸

Elsewhere he expands, “In cyberspace we make persons the objects of consumption. But we can satisfy this consumptive desire only if we commodify ourselves. Self-commodification, however, is deeply troubled and troubling, lurching back and forth

³³³ Borgmann, “The Here and Now,” 14.

³³⁴ Borgmann, “Is the Internet the Solution,” 64.

³³⁵ Borgmann, “The Here and Now,” 14.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid., 13.

³³⁸ Borgmann, “Is the Internet the Solution,” 64.

between unequal cancellations, triviality in cyberspace and gravity in reality.”³³⁹

Interestingly, these remarks are antecedent to the manifestation of Web 2.0 and the advent of social media. Borgmann, to summarise, finds that attitudes toward technology are often captive to the ambiguous promise of technology, which was lent credibility by earlier and ongoing accomplishments of liberation and enrichment. But it is the inevitable and universal pattern toward consumption of commodities and disengagement with other persons, things, and practices of meaning that, within this contemporary culture, Borgmann finds both ubiquitous and underrecognised.

Liberal democracy. According to Ihde, whereas Langdon Winner associates nondemocratic control with high technologies, Borgmann sees modern technology as conjoined with democratic liberalism.³⁴⁰ In fact, he believes “without modern technology, the liberal program of freedom, equality, and self-realisation is unrealizable.”³⁴¹ With technological progress, which has created more open opportunities over closed destinies, a liberal democracy may work toward a just society while *also* leaving the question of the good life open to individuals, which, he argues, has never been decisively answered in liberal democratic discourse.³⁴² And while inequality is a continued blight for liberal democracies, Borgmann says,

I believe that inequality favors the advancement and stability of the reign of technology. The unequal levels of availability represent a synchronic display of the stages of affluence that many people can hope to pass through... The goals of tomorrow do not consist of vague conceptions and promises; they are realized and lived by those above my standing in the economic order... Thus, the pervasive relative deprivation fuels the motor of technological advancement.³⁴³

³³⁹ Borgmann, “Reply to My Critics,” 356.

³⁴⁰ Ihde, *Philosophy of Technology*, 109.

³⁴¹ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 34.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 92-93.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 112.

While this thesis will later critique parts of this assertion, we can nevertheless see, again, the utility of the promise of technology, this time for the liberal democratic project. Class divisions, an uncomfortable reality for the ideals of freedom, equality, and self-realisation, are somewhat placated by the promise of technology, that is of liberation and enrichment, toward more and more productivity and consumption.

It is important to acknowledge that, just as Borgmann finds the device paradigm perfect in its own way, that he too wants to recognise the beneficial association between liberal democracy and technology. He says, “It is undeniable that in respect to health, comfort, mobility, and access to culture the gap between the most and the least privileged is narrower in liberal democracies than in many other societies.”³⁴⁴ With this said, Borgmann sees significant problems when the question of the good life or society remains open. While not explicitly answering the question of the good life, democratic societies did not *actually* leave the question of the good life open, rather it has been answered inevitably along technological lines. He writes, “Both the initial promise of technology and the modern democratic theories were profoundly ambiguous. The promise of technology ironically attained precision and force as it was acted out. Technology developed into a definite style of life.”³⁴⁵ Before we move on to Borgmann’s view of the principal problems within the culture of technology, it is helpful to outline how Borgmann understands both the human person and notions of the good life.

View of the human. Borgmann argues “human beings not only embody significance but also comprehend it, mediate it as prophets and artists, and make it prevail in statecraft.”³⁴⁶ On its face, this may appear a rather sanguine or triumphant assertion. What is this significance that we embody, comprehend, mediate, and make prevail, then?

³⁴⁴ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 90.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

He suggests significance is “nothing but the highest generic term for things and practices that stand out in their own right.”³⁴⁷ Can this be further specified, since as Nick Bostrom has argued, the related term *human dignity* “is sometimes invoked as a polemical substitute for clear ideas.”³⁴⁸ In Borgmann’s work, an associated term for significance is *sacredness*.³⁴⁹ He suggests “divinity may have disappeared, but sacredness has not.”³⁵⁰ That “a sacred thing commands our respect and devotion; it lends our being in the world a sense of orientation and gratitude, if only for a moment.”³⁵¹ The most developed account of Borgmann’s conception of significance or sacredness is in his 2011 article, “The Sacred and the Person.” He writes, “The sacred to a first approximation is a property of norms, things, and persons. Not any property, however. It’s the dominant property that reflects the distinction and superiority of what’s sacred in relation to everything else—the profane.”³⁵² He outlines two types of sacred, *rightful sacred* and *graceful sacred*, which he builds in engagement with Dennett, Rawls, and Weinberg. While the rightful sacred, for Borgmann, extends beyond the human to nature, he is largely focused here on the human being. The person is rightful sacred “as the bearer of rights and the subject of obligations, as a moral agent who is entitled to justice and required to be just. Justice in turn is the first condition that must be met so someone can be a truly human being.”³⁵³ These rightful sacred which commands respect, is for Borgmann, not dissimilar to Rawls from the

³⁴⁷ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 103.

³⁴⁸ Bostrom, “Defense of Posthuman Dignity,” 498.

³⁴⁹ This discussion of sacredness is intended only to illuminate Borgmann’s view of significance and is not meant to introduce a larger question around what is sacred, although those questions are interesting and related.

³⁵⁰ Albert Borgmann, “The Force of Wilderness Within the Ubiquity of Cyberspace,” *AI & Society* 32, (2017): 264, <http://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-015-0608-5>.

³⁵¹ Borgmann, “Force of Wilderness,” 264.

³⁵² Albert Borgmann, “The Sacred and the Person,” *Inquiry* 54, no. 2 (April 2011): 187, <http://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2011.559052>.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 185.

beginning of *A Theory of Justice* when he says, “Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override.”³⁵⁴

If the rightful sacred mandates respect, Borgmann believes the graceful sacred, complementarily, commands devotion. He says it “commands our engagement in a characteristic way. It lends grace to our lives by captivating us with its beauty, by selflessly disclosing the world in its true scope, and by engaging the fullness and goodness of our faculties. Humans respond to the graceful sacred with devotion and gratitude. They will honor and defend the thing that allows them to rest their lives.”³⁵⁵ There is a certain irony here in Borgmann’s argument. This graceful sacred, which bears its *own* authority and comprehension, is *also* revealed by way of the human being’s authority and comprehension. While this would certainly be a contentious issue today (say, for example, among biocentrists),³⁵⁶ Borgmann holds that few scientific materialists suggest that humans do *not* have the power to articulate reality, that persons are merely “just so much stuff that’s composed of atoms and molecules or so much stuff that’s worth whatever the market says.”³⁵⁷ *For Borgmann, that humans carry a capacity to embody, comprehend, mediate, and make significance prevail is always and already conditioned from within a relational context.* Here Borgmann notes, “Humans can unfold their richness as resourceful and capable creatures only in a setting that is rich enough to provoke and answer the fullness of their gifts.”³⁵⁸ This, one might find, has interesting echoes to Müller’s view of praxis which he earlier said “involves a person’s holistic encounter with reality and his or her participation in the process of reality’s social and historical

³⁵⁴ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, orig. ed. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005), 3.

³⁵⁵ Borgmann, “Sacred and the Person,” 189-90.

³⁵⁶ Albert Borgmann, “Science, Ethics, and Technology and the Challenge of Global Warming,” in *Debating Science: Deliberation, Values, and the Common Good*, ed. Dane Scott and Blake Frances (New York: Humanity Books, 2012), 173.

³⁵⁷ Borgmann, “Sacred and the Person,” 191.

³⁵⁸ Borgmann, “Reply to My Critics,” 351.

realization.”³⁵⁹ This multi-directional call and response, of receiving and articulating, is a fundamental focus for Borgmann, and one to which we will return. This leads us to his conception of focal things and practices, which is best explored by way of his understanding of the good life.

Focal things and practices. Pieter Tijmes has noted “that Borgmann is not infected by that great phobia of liberal thought: namely, specifying the character of the good life on the collective level and intervening in society to achieve it.”³⁶⁰ As we have seen, Borgmann notices liberal democracy’s hesitancy to articulate a vision of the good life and sees in the advancement of the device paradigm, a technological way of life focused on the accumulation and consumption of commodities. So here, the good life was as mentioned, in fact not left open, but answered along particular lines. Certainly, a postmodern perspective would hesitate against making larger declarations about the good life. But Borgmann, here in outlining the device paradigm, is saying in a culture of technology, we *already have* been answering these questions (or at least by implicitly accepting the answers) and the breadth of this culture of technology is already vast. He writes, “The question of the good life, as said before, cannot be left open. What remains open is not *whether* but *how* we will answer it.”³⁶¹

Borgmann believes there are three possibilities for understanding and explaining the world and our place in it. First, there is *apodeictic* discourse, which explains from laws and conditions³⁶² and is the emphasis of the natural and social sciences. Second, there is *deictic* explanations. For Borgmann, deictic explanations “do not derive [from] what is to be explained from laws and conditions but simply point up something in its

³⁵⁹ Müller, “Liberation Theology in Context,” 61.

³⁶⁰ Pieter Tijmes, “Albert Borgmann: Technology and the Character of Everyday Life,” in *American Philosophy of Technology: The Empirical Turn*, ed. Hans Achterhuis and trans. Robert P. Crease (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 2001), 27.

³⁶¹ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 178.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 72.

significance....[and] articulates a thing or event in its uniqueness.”³⁶³ What exactly does he mean by articulation? Articulation, he will say, “is both to establish a unique thing or event as does the artist or the prophet and to disclose or reenact it as does the teacher or the celebrant.”³⁶⁴ For example, Gustavo Gutiérrez, in pointing up the significance of the poor in Latin America, is not simply describing certain patterns of behaviour or particular economic theories that illuminate the conditions of poverty (i.e., apodeictic discourse). The subject at the centre is the poor and Gutiérrez is reminding or articulating to the Church the poor’s own presence which speaks in its own right, with a resulting reorientation for the Church and theology. Borgmann writes, “The distinctive feature of a deictic explanation is not its method but its subject, something unique and concrete that is at the center of attention and of its world, a holy place for instance, that focuses and orients the world about it.”³⁶⁵ The third type of explanation Borgmann calls *paradeictic* or *paradigmatic* explanation which is “to comprehend the character of reality by discovering its predominant pattern.”³⁶⁶ To disclose a pattern “is more concrete and specific than a law,” as in apodeictic discourse, “and yet more general and abstract than a unique focal thing,”³⁶⁷ as in deictic explanations. Paradeictic discourse is the way in which he comes to understand the present culture of technology. Of these three, apodeictic, deictic, and paradeictic, it is primarily within deictic discourse, though, that Borgmann believes the nature of the good life is revealed.

Deictic discourse, for Borgmann, is born of a great encounter. These great encounters communicate unique and significant meanings that then inform our sense of

³⁶³ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 72.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 73.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

ought, which is the response and devotion to the great encounters. Consider the following pairs of words Borgmann provides:

is—ought
fact—value
theoretical—practical
description—prescription
analysis—advocacy
empirical—normative³⁶⁸

For Borgmann, the first in each pair is the domain of apodeictic explanation whereas the second are of deictic discourse resulting from engagement with “matters of ultimate concern that are other and greater than ourselves...[that are] eminent, publicly accessible, and tangible concern[s] which can be pointed up and explained.”³⁶⁹ These ultimate concerns he calls *focal things*. By specifying that these sources are publicly accessible and can be communicated with others, Borgmann is working against purely subjective means for determining the good life. And in order to work against a means-ends differentiation, Borgmann argues the discourse should be communicated through testimony and appeal.³⁷⁰ These things that speak in their own right, that are received and articulated in their context, are preserved against further deracination and commodification inherent in a culture of technology. What then are the features of these focal things? They are “concrete, tangible, and deep, admitting of no functional equivalents; they have a tradition, structure, and rhythm of their own. They are unprocurable and finally beyond our control. They engage us in the fullness of our capacities.”³⁷¹ *A focal practice* then “is the resolute and regular dedication to a focal thing. It sponsors discipline and skill which are exercised in a unity of achievement and enjoyment, of mind, body, and the world, of myself and others, and in

³⁶⁸ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 71.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 169. Note: Borgmann acknowledges being informed by Paul Tillich’s concept of “ultimate concern,” but distinguishes that he cannot “accept the ahistorical and abstract sense of Tillich’s notion.” *Ibid.*, 282.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 219.

a social union.”³⁷² The focal practice protects, honours, and perpetuates a focal thing. Example focal things and practices (alternately called focal concerns) that Borgmann will often reference are culture of the table, direct engagement with wilderness, running, playing an instrument, and liturgical services.

So then, in pulling this together, the good life, for Borgmann, is not measured or closed but discovered in manifold focal things and attested to, shared, and protected in focal practices. As creatures of body and mind, and immersed in human/non-human societies, the more human faculties engage with a focal thing and practice, the more they skilfully engage and articulate the significance of the thing that speaks. This is collective action that draws us *closer* to even brutal or severe circumstances. Borgmann explains,

Focal practices provide a profounder commerce with reality and being us closer to that intensity of the experience where the world engages one painfully in hunger, disease, and confinement. A focal practice also discloses fellow human beings more fully and may make us more sensitive to the plight of those persons whose integrity is violated and suppressed. In short, a life of engagement may dispel the astounding callousness that insulates the citizens of the technological societies from the well-known misery in much of the world.³⁷³

Here we see Borgmann’s understanding of the human, as embodying, comprehending, mediating and making significance prevail, connecting within a rich and varied world of persons, places and communities.

Given this project’s larger concern with a technological way of life, it is reasonable to wonder about the curious absence of *technological* things and practices in Borgmann’s outline. This will remain an important contention between Borgmann and Feenberg, which will be explored in detail in Chapter 4 and 5. It is most helpful here to acknowledge that given Borgmann’s understanding of the device paradigm as always pointing toward commodities, and that these commodities are often suppressing, marginalising, fracturing,

³⁷² Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 219.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 225.

or eradicating focal things and practices, he is dubious that such a technological system, while 'perfect' at what it does, will, in of itself, be a useful progenitor of focal things and practices, at least as would meet his definition. In fact, it is this culture of technology that he sees us captive to, or implicated with, that is depriving us of the good life. He says, "What is needed if we are to make the world truly and finally ours again is the recovery of a center and a standpoint from which one can tell what matters in the world and what merely clutters it up."³⁷⁴ This leads us to conclude this expository look at Borgmann's understanding of the nature of our technological reality. We are now prepared to look more precisely at his view of the injurious aspects of this technological reality and the question of oppression, complicity and agency.

Key Problems for the Culture of Technology

An interesting paradox or dilemma presents itself in the work of Borgmann. On one hand, Borgmann has asserted that the broader culture of technology, with its characteristic device paradigm, requires neither reform nor replacement, it is, as we have heard before, perfect in its way. On the other hand, unceasing commodification, economic and cultural, and a life ordered toward the universal consumption of commodities, both meaningful and frivolous, have resulted in disengagement with other centres of meaning or value that perhaps do not present themselves as easily within this culture of technology. The dilemma then is that if the device paradigm is perfect in its own way, how exactly would one reform this dominant way of life on behalf of those disengaged and languishing persons, things, and practices considered to have some persistent value?

We will shortly take up Borgmann's view of reform, but I will first go further in briefly mapping what I understand as the greater arc of Borgmann's concern for this

³⁷⁴ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 225.

contemporary culture of technology, which I have earlier acknowledged in passing.

Borgmann suggests the device paradigm carries a consistent core feature which has widespread impact within societies. He writes,

The crucial trait of technology, thought of as the form of our culture, is the detachment of things and practices from contexts of engagements with a time, a place, and a community. Mechanization is the process of this disembedding, and commodities are its products—consumer goods that are floating free of our comprehension of who produced them where and how...As a society we have, however, failed to notice the transition from real liberty and prosperity to the stage where the availability of abundant and alluring commodities has displaced the invigorating engagement with people face-to-face and with things and practices that demand and reward skill...the prompts that are built into the culture seem innocuous and neutral individually, but are powerful and hard to resist as an ensemble.³⁷⁵

It is in this environment that the individual endures what Borgmann refers to as “a hidden sort of suffering”³⁷⁶ or elsewhere “a cocoon of troubled comfort.”³⁷⁷ This is not affliction from enforced brutality, as much as a kind of harm realised primarily through “the disengagement and distraction of commodities,”³⁷⁸ and deprivation of direct and enlivening engagement with people and other yet uncommodified things and practices. This is a wider view of impacted relationality within culture, nature, and all social relations.³⁷⁹ When the world is reduced to an assemblage of commodities (including self-commodities) which, as he said, have been shorn from those contexts of engagement, Borgmann also sees a dissolving of the presence and authority of a wider world of persons

³⁷⁵ Albert Borgmann, “The Collision of Plausibility with Reality: Lifting the Veil of the Ethical Neutrality of Technology,” *Educational Technology* 52, no. 1 (January-February 2012): 41-42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44429989>.

³⁷⁶ Albert Borgmann. *Holding On to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1999), 232.

³⁷⁷ Albert Borgmann, “The Setting of the Scene,” in *Engineering the Climate: The Ethics of Solar Radiation Management*, ed. Christopher J. Preston (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 195.

³⁷⁸ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 189.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

and things. What is most concerning is the “tendency to destroy or displace things and practices that grace and orient our lives.”³⁸⁰

For Borgmann, these things of nature, of culture and social relations of which humanity will be judged by history most severely, are the issues of global warming and global justice.³⁸¹ These ‘victims’ are on the periphery of the culture of technology and enduring its most significant injuries.³⁸² Why is this? It is because the device paradigm is directed toward engagement in consumption and the largest problems facing our world are, in a sense, the result of various forms of disengagement. As has been outlined, the device paradigm is a consistent way of taking up the world where certain commodities are elevated for engagement and both the complex and unseemly machineries of the device are hidden away and the context from which the commodity arose is removed and/or concealed. More to the point, the salutary aims of technology to relieve grievous burdens has not shown itself to maintain a limiting principal, such that commodification may also eliminate from view what Borgmann refers to as “healthy burdens.”³⁸³ Taken together, noise and signal, so to speak, are being determined and then separated for the commodious benefit of the consumer. *What is marginalised is what is ignored or left behind—the unnecessary or unseemly for the purposes of the commodity.* This disregard reflects a logic whereby “the most desirable pleasures are those that are free of preparation, of exertion, and of obligation,”³⁸⁴ in other words, largely free of engagement and responsibility.

³⁸⁰ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 157. Note: Brent Waters’ book, *Common Callings and Ordinary Virtues: Christian Ethics for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022) is also concerned with locating fundamental wellbeing in everyday practices. Borgmann is frequently cited.

³⁸¹ Borgmann, in “Mansfield Center,” 23:50.

³⁸² Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 146.

³⁸³ Albert Borgmann, “Pointless Perfection and Blessed Burdens,” *CRUX* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 26.

³⁸⁴ Borgmann, “Technology as Cultural Force,” 357.

To summarise, the arc of Borgmann's concerns for a culture of technology is that a beneficial pattern for taking up the world has also produced an intense and pervasive commodification of the world, shaping attitudes and priorities which make vulnerable both the people, things, and practices which are separated apart in commodification, but also those that are outside or on the periphery of the culture—those unnecessary, unseemly, and/or unwanted people, things, and practices, both human and non-human. And regrettable for Borgmann, is that it is among these often disengaged, discarded or ignored that we should also be able to resolve our aimlessness and understand more fully how we might centre and order our lives.

Oppression, Complicity and Agency

A key component for this project is to determine how the human person relates to the more injurious aspects of the culture of technology. From Chapter 2, it was largely understood that the relationship, within conditions of attention colonisation, is predominately of a predatory and asymmetric nature, with locatable market antagonists. As we are here attempting to draw back and consider a wider view of technology, we now seek to understand how Borgmann assigns responsibility for the kinds of problems for which he is concerned. Borgmann is reticent to understand persons as victims, nor to vilify corporate actors. Rather, he believes there is a tacit complicity or uneasy agreement within the larger culture of technology. As we will see, this is an arduous position for Borgmann to maintain.

Borgmann suggests that in the Enlightenment, the earliest emancipatory movement of our time, "the desire to dominate does not spring from a lust of power, from sheer imperialism. It is from the start connected with the aim of liberating humanity from

disease, hunger, and toil, and of enriching life with learning, art, and athletics.”³⁸⁵ The device paradigm, as a manner of taking up the world for liberation and enrichment, has carried forward, at least as an echo, these Enlightenment prerogatives. But, for Borgmann, it is the unrelenting reapplication of the device paradigm, unmoored from focal concerns, that, as we have heard, risks society being unable to hold “a center and a standpoint from which one can tell what matters in the world and what merely clutters it up.”³⁸⁶ One can observe that Borgmann is chiefly concerned for a method to discern significance or value in order to work toward the good life and to diminish the dominant technological paradigm. He is less concerned to oppose certain puppetmasters or rogue capitalists. Nor is he preoccupied with power in the same manner as Zuboff. Rather, Borgmann sees within a culture of technology that persons both have a “sense of how tenuous and futile our allegiance to consumption is...joined with our reluctance to act on it,” which he describes as “complicity with technology”³⁸⁷ or elsewhere “implication in technology.”³⁸⁸ It would be no great surprise to then find out that Borgmann is less concerned to key in on simply the abuses of ruling classes or corporations. This is because, for him, it wrongly presumes that “nothing is really wrong with technology except that it has been abused by the capitalists”³⁸⁹ and it ignores a relative lack of resistance to technological conditions which, in his view, suggests that there is “a kind of consonance between the character of social reality and people’s aspiration.”³⁹⁰ The majority of citizens, within an age of technology, simply do not appear to be held against their will in any justifiable sense.³⁹¹

³⁸⁵ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 36.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 225.

³⁸⁷ Borgmann, “A Sacristy of Focal Things,” 198.

³⁸⁸ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 127.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ Neil Postman pointed out that, in contrast to the dystopian nightmare of Orwell’s *1984*, in Huxley’s *Brave New World*, “people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.” And, from Huxley, that “people are controlled not by inflicting pain,” but rather, “they are controlled by inflicting pleasure.” *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, anniv. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005) xix-xx.

This study will eventually challenge Borgmann's perspective here with what has been learned of attention colonisation from Chapter 2. But it should be asked, if there is a complicity or consonance between persons and a wider culture of technology, does this mean there is *not* also forms of captivity and deprivation, as was suggested by Borgmann in Chapter 1? What is the relationship between his descriptions of captivity and deprivation, on the one hand, and complicity with technology, or the device paradigm, on the other?

To answer this, we should begin by noticing an apparent discrepancy in his work. On one hand, we have just seen Borgmann's view of a complicity, consonance, or implication of persons with the dominant technological paradigm. And this theme is consistent throughout his work. Against an oppression narrative, he has similarly said, "It is true that technological voraciousness is not the work of a minority conspiracy but part of a broad and deep agreement as regards the modern approach to reality."³⁹² Against a narrative of persons lacking sufficient agency, he has also said at the very least there is an "immediate and undeniably large discretion one has in shaping one's free time and private sphere."³⁹³ He writes, "People do have choices here. It is to take a condescending view if one excuses families who surrender and betray their traditions by saying advertisements told them to eat out more often...."³⁹⁴ While Borgmann is, in this case, considering a choice to consume highly engineered food products, it seems reasonable based on his basic argument, that he would also find the suggestion that people do not choose to engage with other forms of highly engineered or persuasive technologies as similarly condescending.

³⁹² Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 231.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 222.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

Simply put, for Borgmann, “most of us are at different times and in different ways...accomplices, beneficiaries, and causalities.”³⁹⁵

Yet, on the other hand, Borgmann describes conditions for humans today in terms that could also be understood as actually suggesting a kind of oppression, a lack of agency, and indeed, suffering forms of dehumanisation. Toward limiting agency, he writes, “Underlying the commodities of sovereign choice is an expansive and coherent machinery. It is a network of production, transportation, and communication. It is unyielding in channeling our lives and is demanding our support.”³⁹⁶ For Borgmann, the pattern of the device paradigm, we have seen, is the “dominant character of reality.”³⁹⁷ This does not yet suggest oppression but a dominant constraining pattern. More to the point, he says, “It would take superhuman strength to stand up to this order ever and again.”³⁹⁸ And specifically in discussing communication through computer networks, he writes of “the almost irresistible distractions and seductions of cyberspace.”³⁹⁹ And elsewhere that cyberspace provides “comforts which we find ourselves unable to resist.”⁴⁰⁰ The notions here, of almost irresistible seductions and a kind of binding relationship with certain technologies, certainly suggests some diminishment of agency.

And while Borgmann seems to understand any constraint as the result of a wider cultural pattern, he is also vivid in his descriptions of a particular and often surreptitious suffering resulting from this way of taking up the world. He says, for example that new technological commodities “will be consumed, i.e. they will not make demands of commitment, discipline, or skill. They will be more diverting due to greater variety and

³⁹⁵ Albert Borgmann, “So Who Am I Really? Personal Identity in the Age of the Internet,” *AI & Society* 28 (2013): 19, <http://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-012-0388-0>.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁹⁷ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 189.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

³⁹⁹ Albert Borgmann, “Grace and Cyberspace,” *Technology In Society* 47, no 4 (Winter 2011): 9.

⁴⁰⁰ Albert Borgmann, “Orientation in Technological Space,” *First Monday* 15, no. 6-7 (June 2010), <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3037/2568>.

closer fit with our individual tastes. Since they will fail to center and illuminate our lives, however, their diversion will more and more lead to distraction, the scattering of our attention and the atrophy of our capacities.”⁴⁰¹ Elsewhere, he describes this consumption as similarly “the atrophy of our capacities and the impoverishment of our lives.”⁴⁰² He also speaks of the mind becoming “relatively disembodied” as “the body is severed from the depth of the world, i.e., when the world is split into commodious surfaces and inaccessible machineries.”⁴⁰³ This seems to suggest, for Borgmann, a form of injury where the body becomes what Natasha Dow Schüll has called “a corporeal remainder of sorts.”⁴⁰⁴ He has also spoken of a “shallowness and restlessness of life,”⁴⁰⁵ and a “disabling shapelessness.”⁴⁰⁶ And perhaps most useful is his description that, “When commodities have reached their final stage of reduction and refinement, leisure will no longer be distinguishable from sleep or unconsciousness.”⁴⁰⁷ *Leisure as indistinguishable from sleep or unconsciousness* provides an important insight into Borgmann’s view of oppression and harms endured in an ongoing age of technology. The perfecting and tailoring of devices of diversion, whilst simultaneously removing that which is considered unseemly or unnecessary, for Borgmann, will ultimately reduce the human into an almost comatic or tranquilised state. Is such a state painful, as if resulting from physical violence? It would seem not. But while Borgmann does not make use of the term dehumanisation here, it seems very possible to see in his descriptions of the *scattering of attention*, the *atrophy of our capacities*, *impoverishment of our lives*, of *disembodiment*, and of states of *unconsciousness*, that he is also describing a reduced or diminished state that is not merely

⁴⁰¹ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 151.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 173.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁴⁰⁴ Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), in ch.6 conclusion “Perfect Contingency,” iBook.

⁴⁰⁵ Borgmann, “Grace and Cyberspace,” 5.

⁴⁰⁶ Borgmann, “The Collision of Plausibility,” 42.

⁴⁰⁷ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 131.

some kind of metaphorical emaciation or erasure of essential human functions, but something actual and acute. This will be explored at some length in Chapter 5.

Where does this leave us then? Borgmann sees an uneasy and tacit agreement within the culture of technology. He sees significant constraints in the device paradigm which would themselves require “superhuman strength” in order to stand against, time and again. And he has described in vivid language what he earlier referred to as a “hidden sort of suffering.” Away from simplistic accounts of technology, Borgmann provides a pattern for a powerful and complex phenomenon,⁴⁰⁸ of injuries, and of complicity and implication. Why does Borgmann insist on maintaining sufficient agency for those already suffering what could be described as dehumanisation? Was it simply that he wrote much of his analysis prior to a more sophisticated attention economy and surveillance capitalism? This may provide a partial explanation. However, there is likely a more fundamental reason that is necessary for his conception and reform proposals. We might ask, what is he trying to protect, in his argument, by suggesting humans in these severely compromised positions (of dispersion, atrophy, disabling shapelessness) are nevertheless complicit and bearing sufficient agency for reform? We have seen Borgmann say that if we simply identify malpractice by a certain group or class, that we risk simply swapping out persons whilst leave technology alone. This is a helpful clue. It seems clear that Borgmann, in situating himself between deterministic and instrumental positions, and protecting sufficient agency for human persons, is simply trying to maintain reform opportunities which are themselves not simply reapplications or extensions of the device paradigm. Rather, beyond a kind of incessant technological “solutionism”⁴⁰⁹ and colonisation of every final person, thing, and practice not yet commodified by way of the device paradigm, that there may *yet* exist

⁴⁰⁸ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 15.

⁴⁰⁹ Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: Technology, Solution and the Urge to Fix Problems That Don't Exist* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 1-16. “Solutionism” is truly the concern of the entire book.

opportunities for human persons to choose to reanimate relationships and centres of meaning which then could inform the way in which we think of and appropriate technology and the world.⁴¹⁰ Nevertheless, at what point would Borgmann consider conditions have sufficiently shifted from complicity to outright oppression or enslavement? And how would a comatic state not already indicate such a point? We will keep track of these concerns. Now, we are ready to unpack, most precisely, Borgmann's view of reform.

Methods and Entry for Reform

We have already investigated Borgmann's view of the good life which provides some outline of the larger direction of travel for any reform. As I just indicated, Borgmann is concerned to protect reform proposals from what he would view as the dominant way of taking up the world in technology. It is helpful to recall that his concern is not to contest the injurious or beneficial aspects of particular devices but rather to notice a constraining pattern within a larger culture of technology toward a certain kind of life. He writes,

The peril of technology lies not in this or that of its manifestations but in *the pervasiveness and consistency of its pattern*. There are always occasions where a Big Mac, an exercycle, or a television program are unobjectionable and truly helpful to human needs. This makes a case-by-case appraisal of technology so inconclusive. It is when we attempt to take the measure of technological life in its normal totality that we are distressed by its shallowness.⁴¹¹

And this shallowness, he understands, is informed by a way of life oriented toward effortless consumption. There is an important point to be made here for a project working toward a liberation theology of technology, with liberation theology's consistent concern for the poor. For Borgmann, the reapplication of the device paradigm, even to those marginalised, vulnerable, or on the periphery of advanced technological societies, is to

⁴¹⁰ My use of the term colonisation is conspicuous here and not of Borgmann. I will return to linking colonisation and Borgmann's thought in due course.

⁴¹¹ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 208.

also subsume those humans (or non-humans) within a perpetuating logic of consumption and commodification. He writes, “It is unquestionably urgent to free people from oppression, famine, disease, and illiteracy. To aid them, however, in the destruction of their culture and heritage in exchange for pointless consumption is a dubious sort of help.”⁴¹² He is not arguing against the sharing of prosperity.⁴¹³ Instead, Borgmann is concerned that efforts in addressing global injustice, or in reforming a technological way of life, are not unwittingly “deflected or co-opted by technology.”⁴¹⁴ It is this dominant pattern of technology, around certain prerogatives, that suggests the need is to expose and limit the paradigm rather than reflexively use technology toward its own reform. In Chapter 4 we will see Feenberg finds this part of Borgmann’s argument too confined. But the point here is that, for Borgmann, the culture of technology is above all trained toward the creation of ever new commodities and in order to mitigate against any injurious aspects within a culture of technology, we must find significance beyond even helpful technological remediations.

Is Borgmann suggesting that we must somehow extricate ourselves from a technological culture in order to reform it? In a general sense, the answer is no. He believes this technological way of approaching the world is so well entrenched that, in most cases, “a reorientation is possible only within it.”⁴¹⁵ We have already heard his argument that the paradigm is also perfect in its own way. Rather, for Borgmann, the necessary reform comes about through engagement with focal things and practices which then “provide the footholds that are needed to gain some distance on the system of technology, to see its blessings and burdens, and to take responsibility for that system,

⁴¹² Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 171-72.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

most to the point here, for the burdens of global warming and global injustice.”⁴¹⁶ This is likely a counter-intuitive point if one was to have understood Borgmann as bearing a kind of pre-technological romanticism or traditionalist position. Instead, he is arguing, it is in engagement with focal concerns that a greater sense of perspective and consideration for our world, including the right ordering of, and care for, technological systems and commodities, can emerge. So, it is for Borgmann, that reform is not the creation of new products and services, which, again, reinstitute the position of the consumer and reinforce the paradigm’s own a priori values and goals. Rather, he argues, reform is simply “*the recognition and the restraint of the paradigm.*”⁴¹⁷

The restraint of the device paradigm to a supportive role, a role that gives room for deeper engagement with places, people, and things which speak significance and orientation into our lives, away from the predilections of consumerism and disengagement, may perhaps seem, on one level, rather innocuous. Borgmann’s vision of a constellation of focal concerns has not implied preference or rank order, per se. But, what does this look like in practice, we might ask? Will this inevitably result in a kind of Balkanisation toward one’s own personal or tribal focal things and practices and wariness of another’s? To begin to answer this, we should recognise the direction of Borgmann’s reform. Contrary to a device paradigm that ensconces the consumer within a cocoon of densely stacked devices, with all the commodity ends pointed, as if with centripetal force, inward upon the person, the direction for Borgmann’s reform is similarly local but instead operates in an opposite direction. He argues, engagement with focal concerns or “the invigoration of life has to begin where you can make a start with it tomorrow morning. But it does not end there....”⁴¹⁸ Focal practices can then shape public spaces, develop into community

⁴¹⁶ Borgmann, “Science, Ethics, and Technology,” 177.

⁴¹⁷ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 220.

⁴¹⁸ Borgmann, “Pointless Perfection,” 28.

celebrations, and “it should open up into the social and political causes.”⁴¹⁹ Borgmann approaches reform as an ameliorative or centrifugal act out from one’s context or situatedness. As we have seen earlier, these focal concerns are, by Borgmann’s definition, publicly accessible and have, as yet, remained impervious to commodification. This will help work against a criticism that Borgmann is offering private, individualistic solutions. Neither is he arguing against reforms or programmes which would be undertaken at the level of institutions or systems. Rather he seems keen to see that wider political programmes are informed by focal concerns, of great encounters, whereby the citizens in attesting to those focal concerns’ significance, seek social and political transformation or reorientation. A world of engagement with respected and cherished things, that is also building capacities of engagement, then generates what he considers “a commonwealth of the good life.”⁴²⁰ This notion seems manifold on one level and rather coordinated upon cultures of celebration on another. Perhaps closest to offering a vision of this kind of society, Borgmann writes,

The hypertrophic utilities of consumption, the expressways, high-rises, shopping malls, and theme parks would shrink, or at any rate cease to expand. The focal points of a city would be its concert halls, theaters, parks, playing fields, public squares, and houses of education or worship. Cities would be liveable and enjoyable for pedestrians. People would spend their free time in communal engagements, large and small. Houses would be built to favor dining, music making, and conversation or reading. It would be a world where life would come to rest in celebration more often and more regularly.⁴²¹

This commonwealth of the good life which Borgmann describes, risks objections over the particular practices he has chosen to elevate. And others may find a commonwealth of the good life as quixotic and perhaps not mapping onto any likely future. But Borgmann

⁴¹⁹ Borgmann, “Pointless Perfection,” 28.

⁴²⁰ Borgmann, “Reply to My Critics,” 366.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 366-67.

seems less interested in precisely ordering focal concerns, or drawing up utopic visions, rather than in fomenting engagement beyond the predilections of the device paradigm.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how attention colonisation has provisionally addressed the question of captivity and deprivation within a culture of technology, while also raising broader questions about a culture of technology and the human relation to it. These questions, I have suggested, are suited to a form of analysis provided by philosophers of technology, Borgmann and Feenberg, and their “empirical turn” method of analysis which carries some continuity with the history and method of classic liberation theology. I have now gone in substantial depth into the viewpoints of Borgmann, which outlines his thinking for the questions delineated at the outset. Those being: (1) key features of a larger culture of technology, (2) key problems within this larger technological reality, including the question of the nature of oppression, complicity, and agency, and also, (3), notions about the nature of the good life, and methods and opportunities for reform or revolution toward such a life. I have not cross-examined this exploration and analysis of Borgmann with the counter-perspectives of his critiques. Engaging Borgmann’s perspectives with his most helpful interlocutors (namely Feenberg) is critical and will be the focus of Chapter 4, to conclude in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4

Key Challenges to Borgmann: Andrew Feenberg and the Technosystem

Having outlined, in detail, Albert Borgmann's conception of our contemporary technological milieu and human relation to it, we will now investigate the contrasting perspectives of fellow philosopher of technology, Andrew Feenberg. The categories, again, which are understood to be critical for this project are: (1) key features of the larger culture of technology, (2) key problems within this larger technological reality, including the question of the nature of oppression, complicity and agency, and also, (3), notions about the nature of a good life, and methods and opportunities for reform toward such a life. Section one of this chapter will map Feenberg's alternative perspectives for these categories. Section two seeks to understand important similarities and distinctions between the arguments of Feenberg and Borgmann. In both Chapters 3 and 4, we are doing extensive work to lay down key ideas which are relevant to contextualise attention colonisation toward a focused encounter with Latin American liberation theology. A transition occurs then in Chapter 5, where I will bring together and set forth this project's conception for how attention colonisation should be understood within the larger contemporary human-technological condition.

Andrew Feenberg is regarded as a foremost contemporary philosopher of technology working from within critical theory.⁴²² His 2017 book, *Technosystem: The Social Life of Reason*, is the most recent synthesis of his evolved thinking on the technological culture and opportunities for reform. Achterhuis notices that Feenberg's 1991, *Critical Theory of Technology*, was based on the assumption that "it is possible and desirable to make a transition from the present capitalist society to a socialism conceived

⁴²² Ihde, "Andrew Feenberg (Review)," 506.

as a radically other and better society.”⁴²³ However, by 1995, in Feenberg’s *Alternative Modernity*, he had transitioned beyond a Marxist vision of opposition between two worlds, present and future, to a view of global technological culture as made up of “very different specific technological cultures...a multiplicity of alternative modernities.”⁴²⁴ Achterhuis suggests this change was enabled by Feenberg’s adoption of Latour and actor-network theory (ANT) in order to see that “technological cultures...form an inseparable part of communicative processes that contribute to the formation of moral consensus.”⁴²⁵ This is an important shift from viewing technology (and/or capitalism) and its reform from the outside, to a perspective which “advocates an immanent critique.” Achterhuis goes on to say, “With Donna Haraway, Feenberg realizes that we need to work from the inside of the great technological beast.”⁴²⁶ In other key writings such as *Questioning Technology* (1999), through to the present, Feenberg has maintained his earliest concern for material action or change toward a more democratic and less oppressive world,⁴²⁷ but, again, he now locates these efforts *within* human-technological networks and cultures themselves. Can Feenberg be understood as diluting his earlier radicalism in a concession to Western capitalism? How transformative or radical are the reform opportunities Feenberg envisions, and what does this admit of his view of technology? From Chapter 3, Borgmann is seeking to protect the discovery and celebration of meanings less conditioned or subsumed by a dominant device paradigm. Feenberg, it appears, is seeking reform through the very technological structures that Borgmann wants to restrain or eschew. Is this correct? In turning to section one, it is important to note that Feenberg’s conception of

⁴²³ Hans Achterhuis, “Andrew Feenberg: Farewell to Dystopia,” in *American Philosophy of Technology: The Empirical Turn*, ed. Hans Achterhuis, trans. Robert P. Crease (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 66.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 77.

⁴²⁷ Hans Radder, “Science and Technology: Positivism and Critique,” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Technology*, ed. Jan Kyree Berg Olsen Friis, Stig Andur Pedersen, and Vincent F. Hendricks (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 64.

the human-technological reality is one where both its key problems (including matters of oppression, agency, etc.) *and* methods for reform are intimately and irrevocably imbricated. It is more expedient, therefore, to consider these matters together as one piece for Feenberg (under the subsection: “Critical Constructivism and the Problems of the Technosystem”). Notions about the good life (or some rough equivalent) are not as readily available in Feenberg’s theory, and therefore, I will investigate his thinking for this matter separately in the subsequent subsection: “What of the Good Life?”.

I. Principal Views of Andrew Feenberg

Overview

Feenberg uses the term “technosystem” to speak of “the field of technically rational disciplines and operations associated with markets, administrations, and technologies.”⁴²⁸ And elsewhere as “a field of technical practices aimed at control of the environment, whether natural, economic, or administrative.”⁴²⁹ His broad theory of sociotechnical rationality does not envision markets, administrations, and technologies as discrete or semi-discrete realms. Rather he writes, “Neither markets nor administrations are conceivable outside a technical framework of some sort. Similarly, no technology is an island; all technology is mediated by markets and administrations. What is more, economic and administrative activity are themselves structured by technical disciplines, various ‘sciences’ of accounting, management, and administration.”⁴³⁰ These technical disciplines and operations are not distinct from the whole of society, but rather “society and technology are inextricably imbricated,”⁴³¹ with “social identities and worlds

⁴²⁸ Andrew Feenberg, *Technosystem: The Social Life of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), x.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, x.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

emerg[ing] simultaneously.”⁴³² Ritzer suggests that this is a foundational understanding for Feenberg—that society and technology co-produce each other.⁴³³

For Feenberg, the technosystem is pervasive such that “practically all significant activities are mediated by the technosystem.”⁴³⁴ We will return to Feenberg’s use of the term *significant* later in dialogue with Borgmann, but here it should be mentioned that Feenberg is arguing that “technical progress is joined indissolubly to the democratic enlargement of access to its benefits and protections from its harms...Even problems that seem remote from technology turn out to be implicated in technical issues of some sort.”⁴³⁵ Feenberg argues this is a key difference from the historical context and vision of Marx, where technology was most consequentially possessed in the factory and the struggle over this technology was itself class struggle. Rather today, Feenberg notes, “Technology is everywhere, including social domains remote from production.”⁴³⁶ This final statement, especially in light of Marx, points to a dynamic process for co-production existing in the technosystem, both for those designing as well as those receiving, utilising or repurposing technologies. To better unpack the technosystem and the challenges within it, it is important to look more closely at Feenberg’s argument for what he terms *critical constructivism*.

Critical Constructivism and the Problems of the Technosystem

Feenberg writes at the outset of *Technosystem* that the illusion of technology (and capitalism) is “that we can act on the world without consequence for ourselves...The whole point of technology is to change the world more than the actor. It is no accident that

⁴³² Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 9.

⁴³³ George Ritzer, “*Technosystem: The Social Life of Reason* (Review),” *Contemporary Sociology* 48, no. 1 (Jan 2019): 55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306118815500m>.

⁴³⁴ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 200.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

the gun kills the rabbit but not the hunter, that the hammer transforms the stack of lumber but not the carpenter...[However] as natural beings, we eventually experience all the causal impacts of our technology, including its waste products.”⁴³⁷ Through engagement with Heidegger, Lukács and Marcuse, Feenberg notes that across the technosystem there is an ongoing aim for universal functionalisation (or “sociotechnically rational functions”).⁴³⁸ This rational process of abstraction, “leaves behind the richness and complexity of both lived experience and the human subject”⁴³⁹ and cannot but have consequences “since nature and human life simply cannot be reduced to functional relations.”⁴⁴⁰ This key feature of the technosystem, for Feenberg, has consequences including that

technical relations concentrate power in the impersonal, distanced subject of technical action and set off dynamics of struggle in multiple settings where personal relations and/or democratic cooperation would be preferable. The blind spots that inevitably accompany functionalization lead to problems such as the environmental crisis. And the technical manipulation of cultural meanings generates a nihilistic skepticism about meaning as such.⁴⁴¹

Beyond the problems of functionalisation, can we deduce Feenberg’s fundamental concern within the technosystem? I believe it is “the threat to human agency posed by the technosystem.”⁴⁴² Human agency, he argues, is key for securing and sustaining certain forms of progress. For example, Ihde describes Feenberg as seeing social reason amidst the technosystem as working to sustain “environmental, feminist, and egalitarian movements in contemporary times.”⁴⁴³ One might ask, why then, if the technosystem threatens human agency for certain valued forms of progressivism, if it manifests distant and impersonal asymmetric power relations, if it has led toward environmental crises, and

⁴³⁷ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 3.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁴³ Ihde, “Andrew Feenberg (Review),” 507.

has stripped cultural meanings which has then created a nihilistic or broad-based sullenness, why would the answer not be a kind of stark deconstruction or rejection of the technosystem, or some profound reform interventions? Feenberg's answer is that the technosystem is already irrevocably extensive. These kinds of significant problems "cannot be mitigated by simply pushing back the boundaries of technical mediation. *Modern society is so completely technified* [emphasis mine] that a return to 'nature' is inconceivable."⁴⁴⁴ And elsewhere, "*There is no purely technical; the technical is always already cultural.*"⁴⁴⁵ In contrast to Habermas' distinction between the 'lifeworld' and the 'system,' for Feenberg there is no meaningful distinction.⁴⁴⁶ Agency, perhaps at its core, political agency, "is not a matter of arbitrary preferences but is rooted in the experiences associated with specific social situations. Technical systems enroll individuals in networks which involve them in various roles...Interests flow from these roles and become politically salient where the individuals have the capacity to recognize them."⁴⁴⁷ For Feenberg, this political agency works toward remediation of the many oppressions operating in, and conditioned by, the technosystem. For example, he cites that "technical progress is defined by the dominant culture by the substitution of machines for humans,"⁴⁴⁸ an idea he connects with Marx's argument of deskilling and replacing workers in a process Marx called "real subsumption."⁴⁴⁹ These foundational understandings, of an already technified culture and the presence of conditions of oppression, leads Feenberg to seek to understand by what more precise means the oppressed can seek effective protest and/or reform within an already all-encompassing technosystem.

⁴⁴⁴ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 160.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

Critical constructivism is Feenberg's response to the threat to human agency within the technosystem. His theory is developed from two primary sources: Frankfurt School Critical Theory and early science and technology studies (STS).⁴⁵⁰ STS, for Feenberg, has been trained to consider the empirical cases of specific technologies, believing that technology is "neither value-neutral nor universal."⁴⁵¹ Social constructivism and ANT have been influential in STS, but Feenberg argues his critical constructivism diverges from STS by the concept of domination it draws from early Critical Theory (e.g., Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse). I mentioned Feenberg's evolution toward reform immanent in networked realities, which was enabled by Feenberg's adoption of Latour and ANT. It is also clear, though, that limitations of Latour and ANT have prompted him to incorporate Critical Theory. How so? In ANT, macro entities such as ideology and nature were thought to be explained by the network. Feenberg points out that critics, such as Hans Radder, "accused Latour of bias in favor of the victors in the struggle to define nature since he argued...that nature in the only meaningful sense is established by the network. But what if the nature so defined is discriminatory? To what can the losers in struggles over race or gender discrimination appeal if not to a 'natural' equality grounded on a different definition of nature?"⁴⁵² While Latour later revised his theory by suggesting that actors *can* introduce objects and discussion in the 'collective' which would ward against certain dominations,⁴⁵³ Feenberg believes that Latour's position nevertheless carries an important weakness. This being that Latour does not explain, for example, the "actual struggle between affirmers and deniers [in an issue such as climate change] and the gaps in national uptake of the policy recommendations of the UN panel on climate change."⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵⁰ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 38.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

Furthermore, Latour rejects what Feenberg understands as useful macro social theoretical concepts such as “interests and ideologies in determining positions on the issues.”⁴⁵⁵ This leaves Latour without the opportunity to incorporate what Feenberg sees as “the principal insight of the Frankfurt School—namely, the role of capitalism in the cultural generalization of instrumental rationality.”⁴⁵⁶ Or elsewhere put more succinctly, “ANT still excludes recognition of an alternative progressive rationalization process.”⁴⁵⁷ ANT, while helpful for taking “account of the independent contribution of natural phenomena and technical artifacts”,⁴⁵⁸ leaves, for Feenberg, a “resulting politics [which] is disappointingly abstract.”⁴⁵⁹

We have set the stage for Feenberg’s critical constructivism. What exactly is he arguing as an approach to conditions of oppression within the technosystem? It is, foremost, to recognise that “the obstacles to progress are often not political in the usual sense but are embedded in the *design* of the technosystem. In such cases, progress is *essentially* through technosystem change rather than the legal and policy changes that are the focus of democratic theory.”⁴⁶⁰ While technosystem re/design may strike some as a rather banal remediation, for Feenberg this is to take seriously the best insights of ANT and the human/technological entanglement. What other more fundamental mediation would one expect in an environment where society and technology already co-produce each other and all significant activity is within the technosystem? Feenberg here is thinking of methods of reform against even the most significant oppressions. Take his view of technical power. He writes, “The technocracy exercises that power under two assumptions that tend to naturalize it—first, that technical progress is on the whole

⁴⁵⁵ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 51.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 190.

desirable and, second, that it can occur only along the established trajectory of development. Significantly, the second assumption tends to feed back into the first, defining the norm of progress in terms of technical potential.”⁴⁶¹ To understand how to mitigate, alter, or reverse the trajectory of developments by those bearing such technical power, we will briefly consider Feenberg’s theories of instrumentalization/underdetermination, formal bias, and concretization which are how “the technosystem can be democratic, technically successful, and progressive.”⁴⁶²

Instrumentalization. Instrumentalization theory was, in his earlier books, the manner by which Feenberg described “how the various dimensions of technique are reflected in the structure of the technical subject and object.”⁴⁶³ When empirically studying a technical object, Feenberg argues one does not find it is “reducible to the causal relations established by this operation.” Instead, “a system of meanings lies behind the constitutive choice of specific aspects rather than equally viable alternatives. Functions only achieve specificity and purpose through incorporation into such a referential system of meanings, hence through a cultural recontextualization.”⁴⁶⁴ This is to say that particular design choices are made which reflect the interests, values and demands, also the context, of the designers. But importantly, these technical artefacts and systems are not simply received, as such, but are themselves appropriated and often reinterpreted (also called “secondary instrumentalization”)⁴⁶⁵ by those downstream actors that receive the technologies. This process of redesign or “resignify[ing]”⁴⁶⁶ allows those “excluded from the original design process [to] initiate changes that responds to their interests and

⁴⁶¹ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 194.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 200.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ Achterhuis, “Farewell to Dystopia,” 90-92. Achterhuis provides a summary of Feenberg’s position.

⁴⁶⁶ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 153.

understanding.”⁴⁶⁷ In *Technosystem*, Feenberg has broadened this framework to apply to the technosystem as a whole, with comparable forms of social rationality in the three institutional frameworks of the technosystem: markets, administrations, and technologies. This is performed by expanding the theory of underdetermination from constructivist STS accounts⁴⁶⁸ to find the “underdetermination in the structure of rationality itself.”⁴⁶⁹ Or, in other words, “[t]he context-freedom and purity of rationality is shown to be as mythical as the worldviews refuted by the Enlightenment. Rationality enters the social world socially.”⁴⁷⁰ Instrumentalization and underdetermination maintain Feenberg’s interest to preserve early intuitions of Critical Theory and show “the role of social struggle and political agency in sociotechnical development.”⁴⁷¹

Formal bias. Formal bias is a term which refers to the interests of technical designers which are embedded or written into the design layers of technical artefacts and systems. Of the potentially negative effects of formal bias, Feenberg says, “Technical disciplines are influenced by traditions and interests and inevitably contain errors. These limits show up in the flaws of technological designs, which may be biased to privilege the interests of a given social group or may contain unsuspected dangers for those who use them.”⁴⁷² These formal biases are sometimes obscured by accepted principles of rationality. Feenberg argues that the most generic principles of rationality across the systems of markets, administrations and technologies are: exchange of equivalents (markets), classification and application of universal rules (administrations), and the

⁴⁶⁷ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 153.

⁴⁶⁸ Trevor J. Pinch and Wiebe E. Bijker, “The Social Construction of Facts and Artifacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other,” in *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor Pinch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 46.

⁴⁶⁹ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 114.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 5.

adjustment of means to ends or efficiency (business).⁴⁷³ Why would these forms of rationality obscure recognition of formal biases? Feenberg argues “the appeal to reason against feudal and religious bias grants the neutrality and universality of institutions that claim a rational foundation. This is the case, for example, with the market, which is justified not by myths, stories, or emotional appeals but by the dry logic of the equivalence of money for goods.”⁴⁷⁴ In short, Feenberg here is interested to acknowledge and name various interests, values or bias which are formalised and privileged in the concrete design of technologies and, in a larger sense, within the technosystem itself. This process of empirically tracing the various design decisions, over other alternatives, is referred to as opening the “black box.”⁴⁷⁵

What other implications are there for Feenberg’s argument of formal bias in the technosystem? One is that once participants are habituated to rational institutions and artefacts, the implicit values can be left unchallenged. He says, “after they are well established, their particular bias seems obvious and inevitable. We cease to conceive it as a bias at all and assume that the technology or institution had to be as we find it for purely technical reasons. Habit institutes ontology.”⁴⁷⁶ Second, formal bias carries political significance. The group excluded by the rational processes of design then “forces its way in.”⁴⁷⁷ “The new actors must struggle to open the ‘black box’ in order to initiate a new iteration of the design process that will translate their values into facts, technical facts... To create a place for agency, technical citizens must struggle to overcome it and achieve consciousness of the contingency of the technical domain.”⁴⁷⁸ Invocation of terms such as “struggle,” “forcing one’s way in,” and the active assertion of presence and agency in a

⁴⁷³ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 22.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

larger socio-technical context where persons may be forgotten, has important correlations for classic liberation theology. And while Feenberg admits of an inescapably technified culture, he does not intend to assume, as necessary, certain asymmetric power dynamics. In this way he would be sceptical of rhetoric for certain technological inevitability or those that declare a certain digital future. This would, for Feenberg, only attenuate effective protest in the technosystem. In fact, secondary instrumentalization as remedy against formal bias is a significant form of protest possible under the circumstances, by his view. Formal bias is the imposition of “rational procedures that govern the ‘world of things.’”⁴⁷⁹ This, in his view, is distinct from substantive bias which is based in prejudice. An example of substantive bias protest would be civil rights movements, whereas protest against formal bias would involve remediation against smog through demands of improved automobile technology.⁴⁸⁰ All protests against the waste products of the technosystem call on individuals and groups to protest from the experience of their own “‘subjugated knowledge,’”⁴⁸¹ which Feenberg borrows from Foucault. These non-scientific understandings (similarly referred to as “nonformal knowledge”)⁴⁸² are asserted as “thought through with some care but not systematically elaborated within a disciplinary tradition.”⁴⁸³ This conflict between lay and expert actors is, for Feenberg, a necessary dialectical approach for reform.⁴⁸⁴ It is, again, because of the thoroughly and irrevocably all-encompassing nature of the technosystem that, to follow Ihde, there must instead be “a gestalt switch within the technical world [that] can respond to the crises and pathologies of modernity.”⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁷⁹ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 166.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

Concretization. Finally, in reviewing the essential terms of critical constructivism, we will outline Feenberg’s understanding of *concretization*. Concretization is the idea which allows Feenberg to move Frankfurt School Critical Theory away from a kind of cynicism about progress being tied to uncontrolled techno-capitalist development. To Feenberg, this pessimism has the unintended effect of opening the door to “a call for spiritual redemption in opposition to a technology-based lifestyle.”⁴⁸⁶ To facilitate this move, Feenberg does some work to interpret French philosopher Gilbert Simondon in his lesser-known book *Du Mode d’Existence des Objets Techniques*. Simondon, according to Feenberg, does not define technical progress in economic terms but entirely in technical terms.⁴⁸⁷ Feenberg argues Simondon believes “that the way forward is to better integrate technology with human beings and nature.”⁴⁸⁸ Feenberg suggests Marcuse (who was influenced by the thinking of Simondon) was not able to develop Simondon effectively as he lacked expertise in detailed understandings of science and technology and was also too vague in his theory. STS, most notably in ANT, has argued against deterministic views of modernity so as to not rely on a basis in some defined naturalism. But to Feenberg’s thinking, as was noted, STS and ANT have failed to recognise “an alternative progressive rationalization process” or put more directly, they have, again, been unable “to come up with a recognizable picture of modernity [an account of the distinctiveness of our age] and a corresponding politics.”⁴⁸⁹ By adapting Simondon, Feenberg attempts to preserve accounts of modernity by which protest can maintain a useful foothold, whilst also allowing the status of actors to both natural and technical objects so as to not resort to problematic normative accounts of nature. Simondon, in his theory of concretization, argues that

⁴⁸⁶ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 67.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

as devices develop in the course of technical progress, they are continually redesigned to multiply the functions served by their components. They thus achieve higher and higher levels of concretization. In so doing they resolve tensions arising from the initial relations between the components and their environment. Their internal coherence increases to the point where they can be compared to organisms.⁴⁹⁰

For Simondon, the term concretization is a foundational law of development which Feenberg associates with the technologist term “elegance.” As opposed to designs which serve a single purpose, elegant or concrete designs serve many purposes and “technologies are characterized as more or less abstract or concrete depending on their degree of structural integration”⁴⁹¹ or efficiency. Feenberg applies political ramifications to this idea of technical progress where Simondon did not. He argues, “Concretizing innovations are increasingly sought in response to environmental problems. They make it possible to satisfy a range of demands that were formerly ignored.”⁴⁹² Feenberg admits that Simondon did not apply his theory outside technologies, but he argues “it is unclear why it would not also include human, social, and ecological conditions.”⁴⁹³ Concretization as an account for progress within the technosystem, especially when linked with Latour’s actor/network scheme, provides Feenberg with optimism. He writes,

Concretization multiplies the actors and concerns served by the design of the technosystem. Progress is now defined in terms of designs and innovations that include populations previously excluded by formally biased designs, or that realize hitherto excluded human potentialities, or that successfully reconcile technical requirements with natural limits, both of human beings and the environment. These progressive developments respond to the exclusions and harms of the capitalist form of industrialism we inherit.⁴⁹⁴

This concludes a consideration of Feenberg’s larger theoretical project, which is framed under *critical constructivism*. We have seen Feenberg’s conception of our

⁴⁹⁰ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 73. Note: Feenberg argues, though, that unlike “true organisms,” technical artefacts are themselves never completely integrated.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

technological reality, problems within this reality, and views on oppression and agency.⁴⁹⁵

While Feenberg's account of progress has been outlined to a limited degree (e.g., a more democratic and less oppressive world), given Borgmann's sustained consideration of the 'good life,' does Feenberg provide any other indication as to his conception of what constitutes well-being or the higher end points for his project?

What of the Good Life?

Feenberg does not take any tremendous liberty to articulate a particular vision of the good life. 'Subjugated' or informal knowledge and experience by weaker actors is theorised as opportunity to resignify or protest through and against markets, administrations, and technologies, including, it would seem, against notions of the good life present in the biases and priorities of existing dominant actors. Of the technosystem, he writes,

Despite appearances, this rationality is not neutral, available to serve any conception of the good life whatsoever, but always already embodies a particular conception in its design...Functional ascriptions reflect the dominant culture, the perspective on experience that guides the selection of useful properties. The functional transformation of society imposes ends privileged by the means that organize social life and those means bear the mark of capitalism.⁴⁹⁶

Feenberg's notion of progress is weighted in favour of localised response. Local progress, he believes, may actually aerate for the development of any future grand narratives, such that they are possible. Feenberg concludes his book by saying, "Replacing the grand narrative with the many local narratives will free the imagination to explore alternatives to both the existing society and the failed revolutions of the past."⁴⁹⁷ On one

⁴⁹⁵ I have not found his view of complicity. It seems clear, though, that Feenberg is interested in how victims in the technosystem may effectively speak into and change the functionings of the technosystem. Complicity would arise as one's own group has cooperated toward the domination or suffering of other actors.

⁴⁹⁶ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 197.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

hand, Feenberg seems interested to foreclose those traditions that would somehow attempt to summon a pre-technological world. On the other hand, he is clear that the current technosystem bears dominant characteristics born of the demands of capitalism⁴⁹⁸ and that communities are divided about a conception of the good life and what rules should restrict all.⁴⁹⁹ There is a certain sense of resignation when he writes, “But the limits of the reaction to the [Great Recession] and the rapid rise of the right suggest that it will not be easy to return to a grand narrative of progress.”⁵⁰⁰

What further indications might we have as to the priorities for a kind of progress Feenberg prefers? One, is an antibureaucratic socialism. He asks, “Under these conditions might a socialist society develop an original art of government based on the fluid interactions between lay and expert participants in the institutions of the technosystem?”⁵⁰¹ Similarly, he speaks of devolving power to members of technical networks.⁵⁰² In addition to further democratic mediations, he gives glimpses of various goals, including: “a better quality of life...and a sustainable civilization,”⁵⁰³ and “an improvement in the human condition.”⁵⁰⁴ Feenberg points out that historically, “inclusiveness, development of human capacities, and rational self-interest in concerns such as health motivate progressive demands for change.”⁵⁰⁵ We heard from Ihde, that for Feenberg, egalitarian, feminist, and environmental progressivism are all aims in the technosystem.

We will, in section two of this chapter, further tease out the implications of this vision. But to conclude this outline of Feenberg’s theory, it is important to recognise that

⁴⁹⁸ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 197.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁰² Andrew Feenberg, “Critical Theory of Technology,” in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Technology*, ed. Jan Kyrre Berg Olson Friis, Stig Andur Pedersen, and Vincent F. Hendricks (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 153.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁴ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 182.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

while Feenberg is reticent to articulate a grand narrative, it is still possible to glimpse a further moral or ethical concern in his conception of the technosystem. The technosystem, at present, does not properly account for hubris⁵⁰⁶ and human finitude.⁵⁰⁷ He succinctly asks, “We control the world with technology, but do we control ourselves?”⁵⁰⁸ We will explore whether Borgmann shares Feenberg’s optimism for a technosystem (or culture of technology) which bears corrective opportunities through the same networks and devices we have also exerted ourselves as masters. This is a reasonable concern for Feenberg’s theory, as even he observes, “The whole world has accepted Europe’s scientific-technical superiority in the last two centuries. Technical power and its associated concept of progress is far more pervasive and influential now than older forms of sovereignty.”⁵⁰⁹ Can self-limitation, humility and global techno-dominance co-exist?

II. Comparing/Contrasting Borgmann and Feenberg

In the second section of the chapter, we will begin by reviewing several of the most important areas of agreement between the scholars, followed by certain important distinctions. I will make some early indications as to which of their arguments might be most helpful for this project. However, this, again, will be performed more comprehensively in the following chapter.

Crucial Similarities

First, both Borgmann and Feenberg’s analyses is based upon, or maintains close reference to, concrete circumstances, a “turn toward things,”⁵¹⁰ intending to move away from unhelpful abstraction. Borgmann, for his part, has focused his attention on the

⁵⁰⁶ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 1.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 194-95.

⁵¹⁰ Verbeek, “Postphenomenology of Technology,” 571.

quotidian or mundane things and practices, and Feenberg has alerted our attention to the various levels of design (including in formal biases) within actual devices and systems. In Chapter 3, the privileging of the empirical (or material) and historical, was said to be crucial for any analytical tool in consonance with Gutiérrez and a liberation theology of technology. I believe our exploration of Borgmann and Feenberg has confirmed their work shares this epistemological orientation.

Second, both Borgmann and Feenberg acknowledge the tremendous value and irrevocability of technology, which has been shaped by capitalism. This was just discussed when Feenberg argued, “society and technology are inextricably imbricated.”⁵¹¹ And rather than make oppositional the technological and pre-technological, Borgmann makes clear that to destroy technology “would be the eradication of all hope.”⁵¹² This is not to say, as we will soon explore, that everything, for Borgmann, is already technological or subsumed by a technosystem. He envisions focal things and practices not as pre-Enlightenment remains, but rather those things that “unfold their significance in an affirmative and intelligent acceptance of technology. We may call them metatechnological things and practices. As such they provide an enduring counterposition to technology.”⁵¹³ Both also readily acknowledge capitalism’s role in the advance of our technological age and the challenges this has for reform of a culture of technology. Moreover, Feenberg is keen to uncover the layers of technical artifacts, and this would include, it seems, embedded profit centres built into the design of technologies. For Borgmann’s part he is unwavering in his focus on economic and cultural commodification which has produced both significant and frivolous commodities, often along what becomes a slippery slope. This, as he has said, has developed into a particular style of life.

⁵¹¹ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 9.

⁵¹² Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 249.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 247.

Third, both understand a non-neutrality for technology. Feenberg sees this within the embedded interests in technological design, as “social groups express their worldview materially and advance their perspectives and interests.”⁵¹⁴ Borgmann seeks to uncover a non-neutrality for technology by tracing patterned responses to the question of the good life (as intertwined with the promise of technology) along lines of consumption. And he argues the process of unmasking must continue, saying, “We need to see the full face of technology. It is time to lift the veil of the ethical neutrality of technology.”⁵¹⁵

Interestingly, while Feenberg admits of dominant players and values within the technosystem (including its entanglement with capitalism), he is concerned to show its inherent flexibility for reform. But is Feenberg’s theory too reliant on the capitalistic underpinnings of the technosystem to make this meaningful? In other words, does his theory’s reliance on the opportunities of the *existing* technosystem somehow lend his solutions to (and therefore intensify) the capitalistic techno-inevitabilism he eschews? Borgmann, on the other hand, sees the larger culture of technology (or device paradigm) as being somehow perfect (complete) in its own way. He believes that the contemporary way of taking up the world cannot or should not be undone, but that focal concerns relocate such an airtight device paradigm to a background position. Is Borgmann too rigidly wed to a perfect device paradigm, such that he misses protest or revolt opportunities through something yet unfinished in the technosystem? We will return to these questions.

Fourth, both Borgmann and Feenberg see in contemporary life an ongoing alteration of human experience in the world, one where technological development and technical abstraction leaves certain richness and experiences of the world behind. Feenberg states, “Our actions not only come back to haunt us through our causal feedback;

⁵¹⁴ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 32.

⁵¹⁵ Borgmann, “Collision of Plausibility,” 43.

they also change the meaning of our world.” Continuing and citing the example of automobiles and airplanes, he says, “The spatial coordinates of our lives, the ‘far’ and the ‘near,’ are completely different from what they were for our ancestors.”⁵¹⁶ While he seems largely ambivalent here, elsewhere his concern is more explicit, as when he says, “The residue excluded by functionalisation comes back to haunt technical achievements where they fail to take into consideration the most significant dimensions of their objects and contexts.”⁵¹⁷ As we have seen in Chapter 3, Borgmann’s entire oeuvre can be read as taking account of this residue or remainder of significant things in a contemporary culture of technology. Hourdequin describes this saying, “Borgmann’s most significant accomplishments lies in his effort to *reclaim the mundane*.”⁵¹⁸ As we will explore, Feenberg envisions an opportunity for the reintroduction of underrepresented or discarded richness and experience. Borgmann, from his view of the proliferation of devices, seems less hopeful. This is likely due to what he understands as the pattern of the device paradigm, which is to hide its machineries and inhibit active engagement with the world, such that certain things are not only forgotten, but that the skill or fluency required to recognise meaning and value is attenuated.

It is important to add here, and this also reflects the adjacency of their philosophical location, that human experience is deemed indispensable in both their visions of reform. Feenberg for his part says, “Modern technology provokes counter tendencies, the protests of citizens who insist on the validity of their own lived experience. The breakthrough to a democratic relation to technology depends on reevaluating that experience.”⁵¹⁹ Whether persons bear sufficient means to reevaluate their experiences in an age of mass distraction and dominant popular narratives for certain technological inevitabilism, will certainly be a

⁵¹⁶ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 4.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵¹⁸ Hourdequin, “Reclaiming the Mundane,” 71.

⁵¹⁹ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 14.

matter for the following chapter. Feenberg does acknowledge that “facile scientism and an uncritical celebration of technology”⁵²⁰ represses human experience. For Borgmann’s part, moral discourse amidst a culture of technology, requires testimony and appeal. He says, “Testimony for focal things and practices is not without its resources. It has a tangible object that can be reasonably elucidated. It is authenticated by our experiences. It can usually rely on similar experiences on the part of our interlocutors. It can, depending on the speaker’s skill, rise to poetry or political speech.”⁵²¹

Fifth, for reform, both Borgmann and Feenberg see local action and principles of self-limitation as crucial. In terms of localisation, we have heard Feenberg on privileging the local. For Borgmann’s part, his view is not dissimilar. The skilful engagement with things and practices is, by his definition, a largely local phenomenon. Hourdequin finds Borgmann’s turn to the local as critical for the efficacy of his project, writing, “One of the risks of any materialist or institutionalist ethical project is that it will shift responsibility away from the individual and onto monolithic, distant, impenetrable institutions that mere individuals feel powerless to change.”⁵²²

But given that Borgmann does not locate meaningful community in socio-technical developments or networks, which are uniting the world, is Borgmann not moving toward a kind of privatism, even if more local? The answer, from our review of his work, is no. He will argue instead that “consumption has an intrinsic tendency toward privacy.”⁵²³ Dedication to focal things and practices, moves us in a fundamentally different direction. And despite the insularity of communities and tensions between them, Borgmann believes

⁵²⁰ Feenberg, “From Essentialism to Constructivism: Philosophy of Technology at the Crossroads,” in *Technology and the Good Life?*, ed. Eric Higgs, Andrew Light, and David Strong (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 299.

⁵²¹ Albert Borgmann, “A Sacristy of Focal Things: Reply to Pieter Tijmes,” *Technology In Society* 21 (1999): 196.

⁵²² Hourdequin, “Reclaiming the Mundane,” 68.

⁵²³ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 243.

it is possible that “a hidden center of these dispersed focuses may emerge some day to unite them.”⁵²⁴ Dreyfus and Spinoza argue Borgmann’s position is a departure from later Heidegger, who believed “there was an essential antagonism between a unified understanding of being and local worlds.”⁵²⁵ For Borgmann, the hope for a “community of communities”⁵²⁶ carries a similar meaning to Feenberg’s refusal to count out a return of the grand narrative.

In terms of self-limitation, we heard Feenberg pointedly ask, “We control the world with technology, but do we control ourselves?” Borgmann, for his part, argues that possessing technological commodities has resisted the moral obligations that owning things has in the past. He says, “To own things requires morally that I am equal to them, that I know them, care for them, and possess the skills and the time required for their use. To call a thing my own I must be engaged with it. Hence ownership of things is morally self-limiting. I cannot own two houses, three dogs, four instruments, and five horses and give all these things the attention they deserve. Hence excessive possession of things is improper on its face.”⁵²⁷ Commodities, on the other hand, are “refined to take little time and less space....Time management and goods saturation are challenges, to be sure. But they are taken to be grist for the mills of technology.”⁵²⁸ Focal concerns work to limit (or marginalise) the dense stacking of technological commodities.

Finally, in terms of important similarities between Feenberg and Borgmann, is, sixth, their mutual concern for a kind of habituation to the manner or biases of the broader culture of technology. We have already seen in this chapter, Feenberg argues that the

⁵²⁴ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 199.

⁵²⁵ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Charles Spinoza, “Heidegger and Borgmann on How to Affirm Technology,” in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition: An Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 379-80.

⁵²⁶ Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 141.

⁵²⁷ Borgmann, “Sacristy of Focal Things,” 195.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*

materialisation of ideologies into the designs of the technosystem then frames everyday experience such that we internalise them as natural. Borgmann argues that the character of contemporary technological life is overlooked as it is the obvious foreground of our lives. Also, as was mentioned in Chapter 3, he argues technology is understood by the wider culture as the manner by which we reach what we value, so the values are often argued about but the way of technology itself is not. So, we have, in both Borgmann and Feenberg a concern for the way technology can be uncritically incorporated in our lives. Feenberg will point toward the actors and processes responsible for biases in the technosystem, whilst Borgmann will focus on an unquestioned pattern in our lives for the production and consumption of commodities.

Crucial Differences

We now turn to key differences between Borgmann and Feenberg in their conceptions of the culture of technology or technosystem, respectively.⁵²⁹ We should begin by acknowledging there are certain areas of apparent disagreement, which upon a closer analysis reveal a more similar alignment of views. For example, Feenberg at one time argued that Borgmann is overly reductive or totalising about certain phenomena, not bearing a level of ambiguity or complexity necessary for largescale analysis.⁵³⁰ Against an essentialist reading of the nature of technology, Feenberg suggests that most citizens of advanced technological societies adapt. He says, “Most users are at ease in this complexity and don’t try and sum it up in a single concept. They shift from one program

⁵²⁹ Note: At times, I will use the terms ‘culture of technology’ and ‘technosystem’ somewhat interchangeably. Usually I am trying to invoke the meanings that come from their respective authors. There is also an overlap between the terms. In a forthcoming dialogue between Borgmann and Feenberg, both agree that technology has a discernible character or pattern in our lives, which can be described as a culture of technology. Feenberg is thinking of the widest range of technical practices, while Borgmann is often thinking in relation to technological consumption/commodities. Both scholars also recognise an inescapably intimate human-technological condition and techno-culture.

⁵³⁰ Feenberg, “From Essentialism to Constructivism,” 298-99.

(in both senses) to another as the need arises. But the critics have selected one aspect of the whole and conceptualized the entire network on the terms of a single dominant program.”⁵³¹ Borgmann, in replying to such a critique, reminds Feenberg that he has, in *TCCL*, plainly rejected determinism. However, he says, “the question that remains is about the character of modern technology.”⁵³² And, “when the structure of these phenomena is so generalized and attenuated and the variety and force of uses so heavily emphasized as they are by Feenberg, one’s approach comes close to the correct but finally unrevealing instrumentalist view of technology that occasionally surfaces in Feenberg’s essay.”⁵³³ Feenberg, in his most recent work, though, explicitly affirms the need for characterisation of the wider culture of technology, especially to foment progressive aims. He says here, “The challenge is to come up with a recognizable picture of modernity and a corresponding politics.”⁵³⁴

As a way to explore the crucial differences between Borgmann and Feenberg, I will include, at some length, what I believe is an illuminating exchange between both scholars, whilst panellists at an event hosted by the Mansfield Center at the University of Montana in March, 2015. The question was asked, how should philosophy of technology form its idea of technology? Borgmann responds,

Commodification is an easy way to get into it...This disruption of the culture is a force we have to recognise. As well as the attractiveness that results from it, because commodified things or practices, being detached from their context of engagement become freely available and fulfil the promise of *magic*, that you can have things just by asking for them. Unencumbered, no trouble, no preparation, pure pleasures...And the loss of communal structures leads to a moral catastrophe well disguised by the pleasures of consumption...[Commodification is] a nice entry into the issue.⁵³⁵

⁵³¹ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 111.

⁵³² Borgmann, “Reply to My Critics,” 344.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 356.

⁵³⁴ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 71.

⁵³⁵ Borgmann, in “Mansfield Center,” 1:39.

Feenberg responds that there is a need, however, for a more complete and nuanced answer. “There are technologies, for example, communication and transportation technologies,” he says, “which you don’t own. So, they operate in a different way from consumer technologies, or medical technologies which we have a very different relationship...than to major appliances or automobiles.”⁵³⁶ Feenberg is arguing that we need much more information about the full extent of the technosystem, than simply commodities, to base a theory. Borgmann, on this point, later responds,

Technology and material culture, and contemporary culture in general, is a manifold thing, and you can look at it in different ways, and divide it in different ways... So, the question is how should you look at it? And I think the way you should look at it is from the standpoint of the good life. You have to have a notion of the good life. And then you ask yourself, under what conditions does the good life prosper and under what conditions does it suffer. And so, commodification, with its twin, mechanization, is I think a mortal danger to the good life. And a very specific danger because its often concealed, overlaid with pleasure and triumphalism...Commodification does not explain everything, of course not.⁵³⁷

Feenberg will then add, “I think we should also be careful because we do gain from the technologisation of modern life certain benefits that we consider not just as material benefits, but spiritual benefits.”⁵³⁸ Feenberg does not expand here on what he means by spiritual benefits, nor which technologies by which they are gained. Later in the discussion though, when the conversation turns to globalisation and its positive/negative impacts, Feenberg points out a beneficial result, which is that globalisation has drawn attention to non-Eurocentric world—that other peoples and cultures are not simply unsophisticated or ‘backwards’ but “had the same dignity and potential as Westerners.”⁵³⁹ Borgmann, will later build on this by addressing global inequality, saying, “The question is, why does the country that could do most about it [global injustice], do so little?...I think

⁵³⁶ Feenberg, in “Mansfield Center,” 5:33.

⁵³⁷ Borgmann, in “Mansfield Center,” 9:14.

⁵³⁸ Feenberg, in “Mansfield Center,” 11:46.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17:46.

the answer is there is something in the culture that desensitises people to these obvious challenges.”⁵⁴⁰ He cites an environmental vision, the 2000-Watt Society⁵⁴¹ by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich, as an example of how lifestyle changes in advanced technological societies could provide energy equitable for every person in the world. He goes on to argue that to foment this, we must “define a way of life that can be shared”⁵⁴² in order to *help the poor up and the wealthy down to it*. This vision, he says, “has got to be good news...It’s the simple life.”⁵⁴³

A final exchange in this dialogue is useful for our comparative analysis. A question was posed to the panel whether it still a relevant question to ask whether technology has some essential quality or whether it is the case that fundamentally it is our own social relationships that get projected onto technology and technology becomes the problem by virtue of those. Borgmann responds,

I think that technology has a discernible character or pattern, and we should think of it as an implicit agreement that we are all implicated in, as a way of taking up the world...So the task is: first, make it explicit, make it a point of discussion, and then if you find it to be questionable, modify it...Is this what we want? If it’s not what we want, we should change it...in a democracy you have to get the consent of the people. You can’t change it over night while no one is looking. Not that you could, but if you could, you shouldn’t.⁵⁴⁴

Feenberg responds,

The ‘it’ is the question for me in what you just said. Does that ‘it’ mean the pattern of behaviour and expectations alone or does it include the design of the technical environment which feeds that pattern?...Yes, there is certainly a pattern, there is a culture that is reflected in the design of everyday life and the technologies that function in everyday life, but I say if you make a negative judgment you want to modify “it”, “it” is both the culture and the technologies...Because the technologies are subject to redesign and the

⁵⁴⁰ Borgmann, in “Mansfield Center,” 24:50.

⁵⁴¹ For more information see: “In a 2000-Watt Society,” Swiss Federal Office of Energy, accessed 25 Dec. 2022, <https://www.2000watt.swiss/english.html>.

⁵⁴² Borgmann, in “Mansfield Center,” 26:48.

⁵⁴³ Ibid., 27:05.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 1:10:30.

range of possibilities is enormous contrary to the way people who do not have any real acquaintance with technical work might imagine.⁵⁴⁵

In reply, Borgmann voices his agreement with Feenberg that redesign of a technological way of life applies to both human culture *and* the integrated technologies themselves. But he adds,

I would disagree on the second point...The positive possibilities are not innumerable, they are definite...There is a fit between the negative and the positive so that the particular culture is such that it calls for an answer of a particular kind...To show how the good life is both possible within technology and the answer to the negative parts of the culture and the design...So the positive part is not as open and relative as people think it is.⁵⁴⁶

There are a number of key differences we are now prepared to articulate for this project. First, Borgmann believes the most critical aspect of a contemporary culture of technology is its pattern of economic and cultural commodification, while Feenberg believes a most crucial aspect is in recognising and utilising the reform opportunities already immanent or available in the technosystem. Borgmann's focus on commodification limits the range of possible reform opportunities, as many reform opportunities, in his view, are invariably subsumed by the same commodifying way of life. Feenberg, as we have seen, carries a wider conception of technology (e.g., including medical and transportation technologies, markets, administrations, and so on) and given the critical role of ANT in his view of the world, the technological aspect of human-technological hybridity represents less, for him, a commodity and more a positive means for social reasoning.

The question arises, even if Borgmann is correct that within a culture of contemporary technology there is a pattern of commodification which can invariably subsume the most earnest of reform efforts, why can he not admit that technology, at least,

⁵⁴⁵ Feenberg, in "Mansfield Center," 1:11:55.

⁵⁴⁶ Borgmann, in "Mansfield Center," 1:12:56.

could or sometimes does serve a pivotal role in the mediation or manifestation of meaning? Borgmann poses the question as, “Is it not possible that a technological device or, more generally, a technological invention may someday address us as such a thing, one that, whatever its genesis, has taken on a character of its own, that challenges and fulfils us, that centers and illuminates our world?”⁵⁴⁷ He responds that it *is* possible, “but none are to be found now, and we must not allow vague promises of technological magnificence to blight the simple splendor of the things that now center and sustain our lives.”⁵⁴⁸ He nuances technological production between instruments and devices, the former being objects “that call forth engagement and allow for more skilled and intimate contact with the world.”⁵⁴⁹ He cites running shoes as such an instrument, while a treadmill is best considered a device. For Borgmann, not to distinguish between technologies in this sense (those contributing toward manifold engagement versus disengagement with a larger context), would be to presume too uncritically that accounts of significance can sufficiently emerge (or be realised by humans) in the current technosystem, with its dominant manner of life (toward commodification).

This brings us to the second key distinction between Borgmann and Feenberg, which is how alternative visions of life (beyond hyper-consumption, for example) are generated. For Borgmann, the structural changes required for remediation of global warming or global injustice require a desire, by the technologically affluent, for an alternative life.⁵⁵⁰ Here, he has followed Kuhn in believing the voluntary release of a given paradigm requires persons to see a promising alternative paradigm for which they willingly let go of the old.⁵⁵¹ How is this alternative manifest? Again, Borgmann directs

⁵⁴⁷ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 218.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁵⁵⁰ Borgmann, “Setting of the Scene,” 193.

⁵⁵¹ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 343.

attention to focal concerns which reorder technology from the foreground to a supportive background, replacing its logic with one where significance and meaning is received, rather than predominantly asserted. He writes,

Science makes reality ever more transparent, and technology makes it more and more controllable. But at the end of our inquiries and manipulations there is always something that reflects rather than yields to our searchlight and presents itself as given to us rather than constructed by us. It is intelligible not because we have seen through it or designed it but because it speaks to us from with the continuities of history and nature...[These focal things] can provide those points of orientation and restful celebration that lend life dignity and pleasure.⁵⁵²

Feenberg finds Borgmann as conceding much of the opportunity for the development of an alternative visions through his lack of engagement with the design of technologies. He says, “Borgmann imagines no significant restructuring of modern societies around culturally technical alternatives that might preserve and enhance meaning.”⁵⁵³ For Feenberg, “It is the human actors, putting their competencies and resources to work, fighting for their beliefs and desires, who will determine which of the emergent structures prevail.”⁵⁵⁴ These are of the most consistent themes in Feenberg’s work, but it is, nevertheless, unclear how *precisely* significance or meaning are ascertained or generated. How is it determined? Will significance and meaning reactively arise when a group asserts itself in the face of domination, sexism, racial abuse or neglect? Feenberg has spoken for democratic and egalitarian interventions. The emancipatory potential of technical socio-rationality in his argument seems clear, but this project wonders again if Feenberg has said enough for how the “spiritual benefits” he envisions in the technosystem are themselves generated. He has discussed how values are delegated in the technosystem, is there nothing to say for how these values are recognised or determined? He has also

⁵⁵² Borgmann, “Reply to My Critics,” 368-9.

⁵⁵³ Feenberg, “Essentialism to Constructivism,” 300.

⁵⁵⁴ Andrew Feenberg and Maria Bakardjieva, “Consumers or Citizens? The Online Community Debate,” in *Community in the Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice*, ed. Andrew Feenberg and Darin Barney (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 24.

discussed the essential role of human experience, which can then be incorporated in the redesign of the system. But nevertheless, one could ask, what is the role for experiences of awe, randomness, grace, or even self-effacement? Does the system he articulates give room for these when, as he says, all transcendence must make sense in technical terms?⁵⁵⁵

Borgmann may have had this in mind when he says, “Such appropriation, secondary instrumentalization as Feenberg call it, does in fact produce liberties... Whether such liberation constitutes an event that transcends and invalidates the device paradigm seems doubtful... given the general orientation of technology toward consumption.”⁵⁵⁶

Furthermore, Borgmann is sceptical of appeals to concepts like rationality or creativity as a source of normative prescriptions. Borgmann agrees with Charles Taylor who said, “These are ultimately quite indeterminate as criteria for human action outside of a situation which sets goals for us, which thus imparts a shape to rationality and provides inspiration for creativity.”⁵⁵⁷

This leads us to our third distinction, which is that Feenberg consistently sees communicative and liberative opportunities existing in the technosystem, where Borgmann sees a consistent tendency for such hope to be thwarted. Feenberg responds to this criticism by insisting, for example in the case of the internet, that “the discovery that much communication can be absorbed into the rituals of consumer society is an important insight, but it is still the case that truly free, reciprocal, bottom-up communication has emancipatory potential and such communication does occur on the Internet.”⁵⁵⁸ He is quite sanguine when he states, “Human communication on the Internet is due to user innovation rather than government or corporate sponsorship. Technical citizenship has

⁵⁵⁵ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 203.

⁵⁵⁶ Borgmann, “Reply to My Critics,” 355.

⁵⁵⁷ Borgmann, “Is the Internet the Solution,” 54.

⁵⁵⁸ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 98.

become a reality.”⁵⁵⁹ Borgmann believes the history of technology has not shown this as the case.⁵⁶⁰ Community online is, instead, subjected to profitability under the direction of a corporation.⁵⁶¹ Community may be possible in certain instrumental regards, but opportunities for communication are yet subject to profitability. He says, “Today, the tendency throughout cyberspace is toward control by corporate interests, and the consequence is a powerful bias away from accessibility and openness toward those uses that are most profitable.”⁵⁶² Also, “The pattern of hopeful predictions, followed by rueful regrets, has been so often repeated that one has to wonder what it is that has been cloaking troubling realities with rosy plausibility.”⁵⁶³ Borgmann points out Feenberg’s historic optimism has not been rewarded (e.g., “his references to Yugoslavia and China seemed hopelessly naïve even in 1991”).⁵⁶⁴ Writing in 1999, Borgmann predicts, “The selfless enthusiasm of hackers and the high-minded support of public institutions, so crucial to the first flowering of the Internet, will both decline. Hackers are getting tired, institutions will get stingy. Commerce will step into the breach, drain the swamps, channel the currents, erect dikes, build reservoirs, and install locks.”⁵⁶⁵ Feenberg himself admits of necessary conditions for the prospering of community online. He writes, “To maintain this structure, the community model requires the continued neutrality of the network so that nonprofessional, unprofitable, and politically controversial communication will not be marginalized. It must be possible to introduce innovative designs for new forms of association without passing through bureaucratic or commercial gatekeepers.”⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁵⁹ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 69.

⁵⁶⁰ Borgmann, “Collision of Plausibility,” 41-42.

⁵⁶¹ Borgmann, “Is the Internet the Solution,” 60.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁶³ Borgmann, “Collision of Plausibility,” 40.

⁵⁶⁴ Achterhuis, “Farewell to Dystopia,” 78.

⁵⁶⁵ Borgmann, *Holding On to Reality*, 214.

⁵⁶⁶ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 106.

Feenberg's conditions, at least for the matters taken up in Chapter 2, have clearly not been effectively established or maintained.

As this thesis has taken up *attention colonisation* as a central issue for a liberation theology of technology, it is not helpful to weigh here the historic balance of 'hopeful predictions' versus 'rueful regrets,' but to test such claims against the specific conditions under consideration. It is worth simply noting that, while both Borgmann and Feenberg are sensitive to the influence of political and market influences on the culture of technology, Borgmann differs from Feenberg in that he sees consistent commodification and commercialisation of devices, platforms, and networks. This is a significant difference to Feenberg who sees instrumentalisation of technological design as a way to shirk such tendencies.

Conclusion

Feenberg leaves largely unanswered the complicated problem of competing or dominating narratives (including for meanings of the good life) in a pluralistic and globalising age, whilst providing socio-technical means for what he envisions as effective protest against capitalistic and other biases embedded in the design of current systems. Borgmann's focus on commodification, on the other hand, prompts him to sidestep other, more comprehensive views of technology, which he believes are ultimately unrevealing for the good life in the context of contemporary hyper-commodification.

Which is a correct view then? A better formulation of the question is to ask, what is a most helpful view of technology and opportunities for reform *in the context of attention colonisation* outlined in Chapter 2? To answer this question, we now turn to Chapter 5, where the task will be to critically evaluate the contributions and limitations of both Borgmann and Feenberg for this project, before finally setting out this project's view of attention colonisation within a larger conception of contemporary technology today.

Chapter 5

Attention Colonisation and an Understanding of Technology Today

The previous three chapters have explored a notion of attention colonisation, as well as theories of the broader techno-cultural circumstances within which such a material condition might be understood to operate or be implicated. This examination has, heretofore, raised a large number of concepts, problems, and questions. It is the task of this chapter to draw together our findings and further clarify what, precisely, is being asked of technology. This chapter will perform the following: first, we will summarise the key contributions and limitations of both Borgmann and Feenberg. Second, we will then synthesise this project's working conception of the broader culture of technology for persons enduring attention colonisation. This thesis has asked in all previous chapters, if the aim is a kind of liberation theology of technology, what is the liberation *from* and *for*? Thus far, answers to this fundamental question have remained provisional, as earlier work has proved to be first necessary. This chapter, while not yet offering definitive answers, will advance understandings which should condition answers to this question—that is, perceptions of and concerns for a technological age that classic Latin American liberation theology might effectively recognise and build upon.

I. Contributions and Limitations of Borgmann and Feenberg

Contributions of Borgmann

First, Borgmann's recognition of commodification as a patterned feature in the culture of technology is vital. Borgmann provides a critical screen for the promises of technology and the inevitability claims of technologists. It also serves to disclose neo-liberal ideology which may permeate into contemporary theory (e.g., critical posthumanism). Selinger and Engström, in their essay "A Moratorium on Cyborgs," point

out a “feedback-loop that links academic theorizing with technological marketing,” which is an “ontological opportunity with purchasing power.”⁵⁶⁷ Borgmann does not argue against the state of increasingly intimate interweaving for the human/technological, but helps us to notice the perfecting of the device paradigm, toward commodities and consumption. But isn’t social progress and democratic participation the very *opportunity* that Feenberg ultimately recognises in the technosystem? We have already seen Borgmann pointing out that Feenberg’s historic optimism has thus far not been rewarded. But for Borgmann, noticing incessant commodification is not so much for the indictment of an emerging species of power and those actors that wield it. Rather, it points up an ongoing mode for the disembedding or decontextualising of persons and things into sleek commodities for consumption. It also points up a notion of human deficiency which the technological products seem poised to remedy.⁵⁶⁸

Commodification shows technology as a larger way of appropriating the world, one which is wound up with the economic and political systems in which it has thus thrived. We find here the radicality of Borgmann. To denude technology in this way, from a certain uncritical ascendancy and inevitability, is not to reduce Silicon Valley, for example, to “boys and their toys,” as some have done.⁵⁶⁹ But it does prompt reflection on what precisely *is* significant, or *more* significant. How do we differentiate significance in an age of sexbots, northern white rhinos, social media influencers, CRISPR gene editing, and gluteal augmentation? The articulation of significance seems a relevant human task today, if it ever was not. We have already spoken of the politics of noise/signal differentiation. Gutiérrez, as we will later explore, understands humans that bear dignity or significance, but are nevertheless marginalised and treated by others as if they do not, as *nonpersons*. In

⁵⁶⁷ Selinger and Engström, “Moratorium on Cyborgs,” 634.

⁵⁶⁸ Tijmes, “Albert Borgmann,” 29.

⁵⁶⁹ Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance*, 52.

essence, he is decrying a certain noise/signal demarcation. Awash of commodities, bearing a range from those found most critical to most trivial or frivolous, Borgmann argues the need for a means to better recognise significance.

This then leads us precisely to the second contribution of Borgmann for this project, that being his account of significance and the practices of engagement that protect it. Accounts of significance are born of great encounters and articulated further in testimony and appeal. Tijmes points out, to use the example of wilderness, that for Borgmann what is at issue “is not judging nature in the light of beauty, but the reverse: learning from nature what beauty really is.”⁵⁷⁰ This is illustrative of a direction and also a manner of life, that emerges in Borgmann’s work whereby the respect and devotion for a given thing or practice is *received* by the eventual articulator through careful (i.e., sensitive, skilful, sustained) *engagement* with that thing or practice. This is a mode of simultaneous reception and engagement. This can be viewed inversely in Borgmann’s conception of the relationality present in the device paradigm. He writes,

Devices are highly relational but in the wrong way. The machineries of devices interlock more tightly and widely than the artifacts of premodern cultures ever did. But what meets us in the sphere of consumption is a commodity that has detached itself tangibly or experientially from all ties and encumbrances and is freely and smoothly available. Hence devices typically obviate and even repel engagement. Their commodities invite unencumbered consumption; unencumbered by, among other burdens, the demands of other people.⁵⁷¹

For Borgmann the promise of technology for liberty and prosperity, through the device paradigm, has extended toward all tasks which can be considered “aggravating and annoying.”⁵⁷² For Borgmann, an emancipatory project of technology must itself be liberated from a hyperactive or impulsive drive toward a commodification for *all* disburdenment—namely through skilful engagement which is, ironically, burdensome. He

⁵⁷⁰ Tijmes, “Albert Borgmann,” 23.

⁵⁷¹ Borgmann, “Reply to My Critics,” 350-51.

⁵⁷² Borgmann, “Is the Internet the Solution,” 61.

calls these challenging engagements, *blessed burdens*.⁵⁷³ We can now ask, could the burdens of engagement be *themselves* a form of retardation or remediation of attention colonisation? We have speculated whether a corresponding vow of poverty could accompany (bear alongside) the predatory poverties of attention colonisation. Contemplation has been raised as a kind of resistor here, but it also seems that the demands of sustained and skilful engagement with those things and practices of significance could also act in a similar way to cool the intensity of attention and behavioural appropriation and commodification. Borgmann's appeal to the receptivity of the dignity or significance of fragile voices suggests that a weight (moral, ethical) is transferred from those which commands respect and devotion to the receiver who is compelled to testimony. This raises both a political and social justice dimension that results from the privileging of a culture of encounter.

This study wonders, though, does attention colonisation not itself risk fundamentally augmenting the capacities for attention through which one moves out, encounters, and hears/responds to increasingly rare and fragile things of significance? Borgmann has argued that the plight of those in absolute poverty in the developing world today is also itself a consequence of the culture of technology. In an age of perfecting commodification, he argues for holding onto the reality of the poor. But wouldn't such a condition (a life oriented to consumption) be even more difficult to elude in an age of industrial mass distraction and behavioural modification along the lines we have explored? Certainly, if Morozov is correct, mass behavioural modification could instead be directed toward the remediation of global poverty or climate action. But to follow Borgmann, this would require the economy "to be directed by degrees toward a life of competence and

⁵⁷³ Borgmann, "Pointless Perfection."

comprehension.”⁵⁷⁴ Do the surveillance capitalists elect to pursue such ambitious goals and do democratic societies want any such plan enacted in this manner? We will explore this in Part II of this thesis, but it can be offered here that, to follow classic liberation theology’s method of centring those marginalised, the attention of this project is inclined to remain oriented toward those persons and things absent or being left behind, disengaged, and/or found redundant. Amidst a flood of commodities, focal concerns are “scattered and inconspicuous.”⁵⁷⁵ This, for Borgmann, invites a life lived toward the uncovering and gathering of that which is being or was lost.

Finally, as it relates to both Borgmann’s understanding of commodification and significance, it is clear that he believes that any counter-paradigmatic approach should be *good news*. He writes, “One who is engaged in a focal practice, however, can reduce consumption without resentment. Engagement opens up space, takes time, and allows things to emerge and endure.”⁵⁷⁶ This is far from a kind of prosperity theology, as here notions of the good life are invariably bound up with burdens—burdens which Borgmann describes as rewarding “our lives the gravity and grounding that are occasions of grace.”⁵⁷⁷

Limitations of Borgmann

First, if one is to take attention colonisation seriously, along the lines explored in Chapter 2, a crucial limitation for Borgmann emerges. That is, he doesn’t explore emancipatory potential if and when an even greater perfection of the device paradigm would emerge. Can a technology, or greater technosystem, develop with a social/machine confluence so tilted against traditional notions of human wellbeing (e.g., liberal democratic rights) that its reversal would take generations, if ever at all, to accomplish? Could

⁵⁷⁴ Borgmann, “Setting of the Scene,” 198.

⁵⁷⁵ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 196.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁵⁷⁷ Borgmann, “Pointless Perfection,” 28.

persons be sufficiently anesthetised or compromised that the mobilisation of resistance or remediation, along the lines Borgmann suggests, are effectively foreclosed? He doesn't extend this far. To explore the outer limits of Borgmann's conception is to believe he is limited in his view of the harms to persons in the present culture of technology today. Recall in the dialogue between Borgmann and Feenberg when Borgmann spoke of modifying the character of contemporary technology today, saying, "Is this what we want? If it's not what we want, we should change it....in a democracy you have to get the consent of the people. You can't change it over night when no one is looking. Not that you could, but if you could, you shouldn't."⁵⁷⁸ But this is precisely what Zuboff is arguing is already happening—surveillance capitalism operates as colonisation where human experience (public and private) is being surreptitiously claimed as a new virgin wood, behind fast-paced strategies of euphemism, misdirection, and larger claims of technological inevitabilism.⁵⁷⁹ Borgmann described that when commodities reached their end stage of refinement, that leisure would not be distinct from sleep or unconsciousness. This is a stark statement. However, has he no view for how largescale unconsciousness is remedied or when such an event occurs?

Second, there is a concern that Borgmann's conceptions and reform proposals somehow remain potentially out of key for persons in present and emerging conditions (e.g., climate change and racial injustice). Borgmann's project, which seems to work well alongside curiosity, aesthetics and human potential, seems to forgo those persons presently oriented instead toward fear or indignation, and as a result are presently pointed toward,

⁵⁷⁸ Borgmann, in "Mansfield Center," 110:30.

⁵⁷⁹ It can be argued that Western democracies possess the means to regulate these actions by private operators, and these operators are already legally required to disclose how sensitive and personal data are to be possessed and shared. But, to use the example of a single Nest thermometer, Zuboff summarises studies that show that this would require an individual to review a *thousand* privacy and data contracts (if one was to follow up with all the third parties utilising data for predictive analysis and sales). It is unlikely the present level of asymmetric power and knowledge being described could be democratically rebalanced, at least in the near term. Zuboff, *Age of Surveillance*, 7.

say, battle or disengagement, rather than some kind of cultivated self-actualisation. Is there sufficient force or urgency behind Borgmann's proposals for them to be received today? Also, Borgmann, in maintaining his reverence for the significance of focal things and practices (as he defines them), risks missing a required exigency for conditions of attention colonisation, even if radical reform is now also through technological devices. This takes us to a review of Feenberg's contributions and limitations for this study.

Contributions of Feenberg

Feenberg, in taking both literally and seriously an irrevocably technified contemporary world, is able to then press on with focused examination of the technosystem, both for its present oppressions and radical reform opportunities. Feenberg's conception has the benefit for this project of seeing acutely, first, the deleterious effects of the technosystem, including the concentration of power in impersonal and remote technical action. And second, how social struggle can and is enacted *in* the technosystem—the precise matrices for change—including the digging out (uncovering) of often surreptitious biases in the system.

Regarding the first point, Feenberg will describe harmful conditions which seem in continuity with histories of Western dominance and colonialism, the kind to which first generation liberation theologians would be sensitive. The notable difference, however, is that the conditions Feenberg describes are now effectively global. We heard him saying, “The whole world has accepted Europe's scientific-technical superiority in the last two centuries. Technical power and its associated concept of progress is far more pervasive and influential now than older forms of sovereignty.”⁵⁸⁰ And, “resistance to the new forms of oppression based on technical rationality is precisely what inspired Marx and the first

⁵⁸⁰ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 194-95.

generation of the Frankfurt School. Today it is global...the whole planet confronts a common fate.”⁵⁸¹ He will argue that despite appearances, forms of rationality driving the technosystem are not neutral, but “always already embodies a particular conception [of the good life] in its design.”⁵⁸² The designs at play in the contemporary technosystem, he has argued, are themselves a threat to human agency. This observation connects well with concerns raised in conditions of attention colonisation, with the benefit of provoking emancipatory measures that do not shun the technical means of remediation available within the assemblage of human/technological networks themselves.

To the second point, given an urgency of response which attention colonisation seems to prompt, the relative vigour of Feenberg’s language for social struggle amidst nonabstract sociohistorical dimensions also has an important consonance with the sorts of liberative movements we are concerned. Feenberg brings a prescriptive socio-political urgency, a warm-bloodedness if you will, which contrasts to the style and remediations of Borgmann. Feenberg has pointed to several key insights for this struggle for human agency within the technosystem. First, he has helped us to recognise profit centres that are often embedded within the designs of certain technologies and reflect the biases of their interests. This straightforward observation about monetisation within the structures of technologies themselves, serves to provoke vigilance or wariness against the claims of technological apologists that would present a good or service as inevitable or that the good or service is simply as the marketing materials might suggest.⁵⁸³ Second, for Feenberg, the oppressed, while affected and marginalised, nevertheless carry forward the potential for radical movements, as we heard, “by resistances, hacking, artistic experimentation, and imaginative solutions that signal the existence of unmet needs and suppressed

⁵⁸¹ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 196.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, 197.

⁵⁸³ This is not to negate that the final impacts of technologies are very often unknown by the designers themselves.

capacities.”⁵⁸⁴ Here, for example, “order is *tricked* by an art.”⁵⁸⁵ Feenberg will locate the means necessary, within the material layers of the technosystem, to work toward a better system/society, including utilising, gaming, or reinventing the system back against the dominant actors themselves.

Limitations of Feenberg

This project recognises three limitations to Feenberg’s theory. First, and this has been intimated earlier, it is unclear how significance or notions of the good life are generated or operate within the technosystem, that is, beyond the outcry and demands of those harmed or marginalised. While Feenberg sees tremendous potential for remediation of the technosystem, there is a risk that underarticulated human value risks being devolved or obscured by the machinations of the current technosystem. There seems to be missing, in his conception, the matrices of inspiration and enthusiasm which might animate not just the struggles and interests of a group, but also ascribe collective meanings beyond tribe or species. How does the validity of political identity not ultimately collapse without also a move toward collective being? Distracted consumption, perhaps a kind of anaesthetisation, is a particular kind of injury which could attenuate meanings which might gird struggle, to some degree today and perhaps dramatically more so in the future, if the increasing sophistication of human/machine confluence is to be believed. Borgmann has asked, why should, for example, technology *not* penetrate the remaining areas of wilderness?⁵⁸⁶ Feenberg suggests humans already control the world but find it difficult to control ourselves.⁵⁸⁷ These two statements together are essentially pointing up the need for accounts of significance and meaning for which we relinquish or limit control (including

⁵⁸⁴ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 84.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁵⁸⁶ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 182.

⁵⁸⁷ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 5.

away from consumption) in exchange for the emergence of other disclosed meanings of the good life.

Second, there is a concern that Feenberg also assumes too much agency or autonomy for those presently compromised by commercialised attention colonisation. Feenberg, in arguing for a necessary dialectical approach for reform, relies on a recognition by persons that the designs of technologies, which mediate virtually all existence, are both massively reformable and that citizens possess notions for how the technical apparatuses could or should be redirected. Even if this is granted as entirely plausible, how would conditions of extreme attention colonisation impact such movements? Feenberg is generous to the nonrational basis for human experiences of injustice and the responses it sets off, and this seems right. But whether, as we have said, this eventually constitutes a reimagining of the collective human/technological project (including away from commodification and consumerism) and whether there are sufficient attentional resources for such reflection and action is, I believe, increasingly doubtful.

As of 2017, Feenberg wrote, “Despite the dispiriting commercialism of Facebook and Google, and the role of corporate and government surveillance in stripping us of the last vestiges of privacy, there is another side to the story.”⁵⁸⁸ That the development of alternative modernities, through social technologies, could still persist in the face of severe abuses and control by increasingly dominant corporate actors is, at best, a qualified optimism. This says nothing, as well, for the destructive animosity between online tribes today. Shullenberger argues since 2011, there has been a new ‘net delusion’⁵⁸⁹ which is based in a present factionalism and desire to control a fractured information ecosystem. This, he says, results in the appropriation of manipulation and propaganda techniques in

⁵⁸⁸ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 108.

⁵⁸⁹ The first ‘net delusion’ was described by Morozov in his book, which critiqued an older “cyber-utopianism.” Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion* (London: Penguin Books, 2011).

defence of one's own narrative and to resist the rising popularity of another's.

Shullenberger summarises this, saying,

The earlier cyber-utopian consensus overrated the value of information in itself and underrated the importance of narratives that bestow meaning on information. The openness of the media system to an endless stream of new users, channels, and data has overwhelmed shared stable narratives, bringing about what L.M. Sacasas calls, 'narrative collapse.'

But sustaining ideological projects and achieving political ends still requires narratives to extract some meaning from the noise. In the over-saturated attention economy, the most extreme narratives generally stand out. As a result, open networks, which were supposed to counteract propaganda, have instead caused its proliferation—sometimes top-down and state-directed, sometimes crowdsourced, often both.⁵⁹⁰

Feenberg had said in 2004 that the internet will ultimately be settled through a political process.⁵⁹¹ Yes, but a politics mediated by whom, based on what information, within what explanatory frameworks, and at what costs? Feenberg believes all transcendence must make sense in technical terms and this may ultimately be the case. If the technosystem is both essential and bearing out incredible tensions, where might we seek out manoeuvrable space for the building of a greater society⁵⁹² in this network?

Third, if emancipatory means are placed squarely in and through the technosystem, as such, there seems to also be concessions to inevitable commodification and a world tightly kept within its borders. It is also not clear that this conception does not also (implicitly?) lend credence to Europe's scientific-technical superiority and provide neo-liberalism an always head-start, including for attention colonisation. Resistance is conditioned unduly along lines ultimately dictated by the operators governing the highways and byways of the system. Even his remediations in secondary-instrumentalisation seem nevertheless to invariably reinforce the structure itself. In the end, what hope is this? Feenberg observed that "we eventually experience all the causal

⁵⁹⁰ Geoff Shullenberger, "The New Net Delusion," *The New Atlantis* 62 (Fall 2020): 51-52.

⁵⁹¹ Feenberg, "Consumers or Citizens?," 15.

⁵⁹² This term "greater society" has been advanced by Peter Manley Scott. Most recently, see Scott, *A Theology of Postnatural Right* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2019), 7.

impacts of our technology, including its waste products” which can be “obscured by the seductive allusion of technology.”⁵⁹³ The larger concern here is that, unchecked, human beings, along with all else, could either be declared or interpreted as a kind of waste product of the technosystem.

Borgmann/Feenberg for this Project

Familiar framings of traditional/progressive and optimistic/pessimistic are difficult and ultimately unhelpful categories to apply to Borgmann and Feenberg—effective cases can be made for most of these and their combinations. Both Borgmann and Feenberg, though, assume a similar set of basic conditions: the irrevocable human/technological imbrication which admits of problems, limits and opportunities yet; an ongoing techno-capitalism; and the continuing catastrophes of global injustice and climate emergency. Within these assumptions, it is most helpful to notice areas of emphasis that each author privileges.

Borgmann understands a history where the promise of technology is often wed to a world of commodification/consumption. He argues, in effect, that the technosystem indeed has utility and is a present reality, however, a richer culture of engagement which centres and orders our lives is less the result of active assertions through mechanised decontextualisation, and instead is discovered in a form of life yet less mediated by commodified devices. For a liberation theology of technology, rehabilitating more fulsome engagement with the estranged, and locating good news within relations of fragile and yet undercolonised things and ways of life, should remain an important priority and insight for this project.

⁵⁹³ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 3.

Borgmann, though, has resisted adjusting or updating his theory to the harsh and discrete conditions of the technosystem which make moving out or beyond mediated devices/networks increasingly challenging, whether this is by choice, coercion or some combination. Perhaps his own experiences of the yet less colonised or commodified things and practices places a kind of moral barrier within his work. To concede to the totalisation of the technosystem would be to, in effect, turn his back, in effect, on those things that speak in their own right, which have spoken to him and have grounded his or his community's own wellbeing. His affective descriptions of wilderness, and meals prepared and celebrated together, would seem to suggest this is the case.

Feenberg, for his part, will point up the actors responsible for biases in the technosystem and the ways in which various forms of revolt are therein manifest. This too is key for a liberation movement of technology. Feenberg's resources in Marx, for example, is consonant with some of the primary influences of classic Latin American liberation theology—itsself a theology which seeks action today, a resistance to postponing the Reign of God that is “built in history—together with other human beings.”⁵⁹⁴ To take seriously the conditions of attention colonisation and surveillance capitalism should, it seems, welcome myriad forms of effective protest, including in the techno-capitalist frameworks which increasingly humankind *are* embedded. Borgmann will find such a response as risking an almost impulsive or hysteric continuance of the device paradigm. But, again, it is unclear that Borgmann acknowledges or understands the oppressive conditions of attention colonisation enough to not *also* seek remediation through reinterpreting and perverting the very means of oppression. If Zuboff's insights are indeed prescient, in an age of attention colonisation, surveillance capitalism and greater

⁵⁹⁴ Jon Sobrino, “Central Position of the Regin of God in Liberation Theology,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 386.

human/machine confluence, Feenberg's means for remediation may be increasingly what remains.⁵⁹⁵

Feenberg, though, it seems has unnecessarily wed himself to an overly rigid ontology of the technosystem, whereby *all* significance is necessarily mediated through the technosystem as such. As I have started to indicate, it is nevertheless unclear how friction or roughness, quirkiness, and noise, not to speak of grace, mystery, and contingency, should be effectively deciphered, protected or fostered—at least not as the technosystem operates at present. This project is sceptical, with Borgmann, that a plethora of possibilities are open, and not already conditioned along certain lines, within the technosystem. A repeated pattern within a culture of technology is the political function of separating noise and signal, whether this is in the hands of certain technologists or simply the result of an ongoing form of life in which participants agree and, by degrees, are complicit. So, to narrow reform to such things as secondary instrumentation in the technosystem could risk invariably reinforcing the system's logic and conditioned way of appropriating the world. While certainly not his intention, I wonder also if Feenberg, in situating actors so precisely in the technosystem as such, isn't also subjecting them to unhelpfully narrow or harmful definitions for what it means to be human. Is there *no* opting out of, say, a cyborg or technosystem ontology? If that is so, then how does this advance the interests of certain actors and the ways of life they market?

It should be asked, have we sufficiently addressed what is oppression versus collusion/complicity amidst conditions of attention colonisation? It is unlikely, although we have begun to chart a course. Predatory actions which captivate and deprive persons of

⁵⁹⁵ There are religious subcultures, such as the Amish, which maintain a way of life much less impacted by contemporary techno-capitalism. This thesis is written for those who are already suffering in the epicentres of advanced technological societies. The presence of groups like the Amish or Mennonites raises interesting questions about the value and feasibility of alternative-living communities today for the issues raised. Also, the value of cloistered religious orders as a remnant, beacon and resource (to the larger culture outside their walls) would also be interesting to research in light of attention colonisation and its trajectory.

a fuller range of deeper engagement is not simply the responsibility of those whose dopamine has been gamed and whose behavioural data is being assumed. There is not a mystery of origins for these practices, be it in the attention economy or surveillance capitalism. However, the greater promise of technology, away from death and deprivation, to liberation and enrichment, has been, it seems, uncritically followed *ad infinitum* in a culture of technology. *I believe to resist and reform the system, as it stands, would be to take particular actions both in the designs and uses of devices (e.g., standing for those things declared unnecessary as noise) and in centres of meaning and explanatory frameworks which are yet undercolonised in the ongoings of techno-capitalism.* That the commodification of persons in advanced technological societies (including self-commodification) emerges at this advanced level of the perfecting of the technological culture may come as no surprise. Altered or obscured definitions of what it means to be human would also seem inevitable here. But re-politicising “noise” (be it the noise of quirky, inefficient humans, the poor, or other “nonpersons”) is achieved, this project believes, by actions through “the interstices of the system” *and* with direct engagement with those things which remain less or yet uncommodified, that Borgmann said “speak in their own right.”

There is a one final, and a most speculative, point here. On one hand, Feenberg has both an acute and comprehensive awareness of the vastness of the technosystem. On the other hand, Borgmann carries what seems an implicit sorrow at the ongoing loss (both in extinction and as disremembering) this manner of life bears upon species of focal things and practices (i.e., cultural, religious, environmental). Could it be that Borgmann and Feenberg lead us to conclude that everything is, in effect, already being consumed, including, we might think, in perfect commodification, the human? That is to say, could

the completion of the device paradigm be the end of humanity, such that “*a new man*”⁵⁹⁶ is emancipated in history? Or, as this project is inclined, does a theology which privileges poverty and contemplation, a culture of deeper engagement and of ‘blessed burdens,’ amidst the injuries of attention colonisation, serve to somehow retard calamitous intensification and open new social, political and spiritual vistas within the technosystem?

II. Attention Colonisation within a Larger View of Technology

An obstacle, we have said, for a liberation theology of technology is that, relative to more recognised forms oppression and deprivation, attention colonisation presents as a rather bloodless and pleasant affair. There are reasons, some of which we have already explored, why a contemporary culture of technology will often not take seriously its own relationship with technology and the surreptitious forms of entrapment therein. Now, in Chapter 2 it was argued that attention colonisation *can* indeed be understood as harmful in its own right. It is also *not* a condition exclusive to the world’s most privileged citizens, since, as we have seen, Borgmann and Feenberg are both arguing that the device paradigm and/or technosystem (respectively) are presently subsuming the world. The key insight from attention colonisation, though, is that through an awareness of its ongoing predation (whether mild manipulation on one end to abject coercion and entrapment on the other) that there becomes an inevitable sense of loss at what could have been, what was somehow let go of, or avoided. This painful or uncomfortable lens of alternative lives not only points to the value of these forgotten things but also the neglected and unavoidable relatedness of all things. Or put slightly different, attention colonisation prompts one to enquire about the lives which could have been lived during the same period, and how the

⁵⁹⁶ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 91.

attentionally colonised have invariably impacted those humans and nonhumans enduring other (more recognised) forms of suffering and deprivation.

There is a simple reason for the negative impact of attention colonisation. Attention colonisation adheres itself to and corrodes the very hinges of relationality. Also, the predilection of technology toward certain ways of taking up the world (including toward corporate ends) bends the reality which is discovered through its technological mediations. Attention colonisation is itself not a uniform condition, but always works in degrees of sidelining—such that persons must somehow come to comprehend the degree to which they have been retired from the social life of a community or society.

A key task which we have learned from philosophy of technology is to re-view or to make bizarre (at least temporarily) the normative claims of our culture of technology long enough to recognise the harms from the present way of life (including to our own selves) and to reveal this way of life's relationship to a vulnerable poor and planet. Moreover, understanding the precise nature of this colonisation also reveals, by way of a foil, the values or poles of meaning and practice which may reverse such colonisation—in other words, the forms of life which may work against colonisation's active progress. Also, we find it is difficult, if not impossible, to take up the technological artifacts and benefits of techno-capitalism without also importing, at least to a significant degree, the larger way of life by which these artifacts and benefits have been procured. With a culture of technology moving quickly to all corners of the earth, appreciating the biases and harms of the technosystem, especially as designed and reinforced in the Global North, is critical.

Thinking with Feenberg, we might say that an *already technified* environment is another way of saying that citizens in advanced technological societies are already kept within a captive environment. What is this captive environment? I have already argued that Feenberg's technosystem does not provide sufficient imaginative space for alternative

modernities to emerge which are not unduly conditioned by a dominant, neoliberal, way of taking up the world. This reflects a kind of capture.

Moreover, Borgmann understands a disaggregation of the world through incentives to locate and eliminate any and all remaining burdens through mechanical/technological means. Unfortunate for this way of taking up the world, we can say *burdens are never free agent things*. They are attached to and between things living and non-living. Borgmann is most helpful here with his term *blessed burdens*. Blessed burdens, in the ways of techno-capitalism, are often unrecognised in their positive *earthly sense*. Burdens, viewed through the lens of contemporary techno-capitalism, are more often understood as impediments—that which prevents humanity from *lift-off*. Burdens, again, are viewed by this ideology as unsolved problems not yet transformed (including as a result of colonisation) into commodities/solutions. The irony here is that while blessed burdens are in all likelihood what may bring humans down to earth,⁵⁹⁷ the contemporary technological way of life, itself a major limit on freedom and wellbeing, *cannot* itself be a blessed burden. Why is this the case? It is because, despite the range of transformative actions that humans may take, the technosystem, at its core, is not a sufficiently open system. Rather, to follow Borgmann, it limits persons by its commodifying predilections. *Therefore, we can only hope to reorder or attenuate this kind of enclosure, to rewild the commons within in it, and ground our smallest and most ambitious human projects in a plurality of norms and practices fit for the times.*

Feenberg is helpful to point out that the technical ‘rationality’ of the technosystem. He has also highlighted what he believes is a malleability in the system. I have already suggested that his optimism is largely unfounded, and indeed, he does place himself in the

⁵⁹⁷ This metaphor is adapted from: Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 2.

moonstruck company of other early internet techno-utopians. But it should be said, Feenberg has performed a most careful and helpful study of the logic, if you will, of the technosystem. We can see this expanding and standardising technosystem actually affords certain parties a kind of entrepreneurial risk management, to be sure. As the adage goes, businesses require certainty.⁵⁹⁸ This certainty is not reserved simply for interest rates or stable international trade accords. I believe the technosystem, even with the tremendous potential for social transformation and progress that its networks provide, also provides a predictability within its structures that firms may comprehend and subsume. We now see that in attention colonisation, especially expressed in surveillance capitalism, this propensity for predictability becomes sacralised. Joined upon network stabilities, the quirks, friction, imperfection, and noise of many things (including of the human) can be smoothed over to create predictive actions (behavioural data) that are readily sold. When rational network systems have resident owners and operators (and privileged renters) that apply these further propensities for predictability to all things, an unfortunate confluence occurs. We might call it *techno-capitalistic escalation*. Techno-capitalistic escalation is a perpetuated intensification and colonisation that reinforces the conditions of the techno-enclosure. Even the solutions, when viewed from the angle of techno-colonisation/commodification, only seem to perpetuate the process toward greater techno-human confluence upon the highways and byways of the technosystem, with its proprietary market gatekeepers.

In turning then to theology, from the research in Chapter 2, I identified four areas which could be developed for a theology of liberation. These were: (1) theology and the church's role in orientation (i.e., sanctuary, behavioural architecture, and alternative value

⁵⁹⁸ One recalls, for example, during Brexit, the business sector's most common outcry was the need for certainty, by which they might plan. The point is less about how much certainty businesses require and more that they prefer and benefit from it.

centres) for those with injured capacities for attention, (2) asserting certain values (or rights) for human beings including attentional capacities and autonomy from dehumanising attention colonisation, (3) engagement with realities where fluency remains weak, as well as (4), the role of voluntary poverties or constraint as interruption to colonisation in this context. Overall here, it should be noted that we can identify a problem with uncritically lending techno-capitalistic escalation the resources of Christian faith, hope, and love. Hope, for example, when provided as grist in the mill for techno-capitalism can become a kind of techno-triumphalism (and perceived inevitabilism) for current techno-colonisation processes.⁵⁹⁹ Peter Scott has written, “Can Christianity speak to this world?”⁶⁰⁰ By this he means, can Christianity contribute something to the contemporary world whereby the deposit of faith⁶⁰¹ is *not* also inevitably transformed or subsumed into ideology? In the context of this project, for anything or anyone to effectively resist being transformed or subsumed by economic or moral commodification (or indeed to reverse commodification), it is always necessary to somehow *retard* techno-capitalistic escalation. Recall the off-handed remark by Alter, where in the context of his concern for behavioural addiction with certain devices, suggested “sluggishness is the enemy of addiction, because people respond more sharply to rapid links between action and outcome.”⁶⁰² Our close consideration of attention colonisation in Chapter 2 showed that operant conditioning alters user behaviour by utilising a system of rewards and consequences. Desired outcomes, for example, in social media, trigger happy hormones such as dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin. Social media and online games often attempt to maintain a “compulsion loop”⁶⁰³ which utilises

⁵⁹⁹ We can also think here of Christian transhumanists who may invariably lend the Christian narrative to techno-colonisation. For work on transhumanist theologies, see Michael Burdett. For example: *Eschatology and the Technological Future* (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁶⁰⁰ Peter Manley Scott, *Theology, Ideology and Liberation: Towards a Liberative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2.

⁶⁰¹ Scott does not use the term deposit of faith, but is, I believe, faithful to his meaning.

⁶⁰² Alter, *Irresistible*, 44.

⁶⁰³ Ronald J. Deibert, *Reset: Reclaiming the Internet for Civil Society* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2020), 98.

techniques such as “variable rate reinforcement” to provide rewards and entice players to play repeatedly. We can see that rapid cycles of action/outcome or action/dopamine can propel such compulsion. *This is not simply a problem of consumption.* This pattern of human-machine compulsion and confluence is mirrored in the techno-capitalistic escalation which itself drives production. Production and consumption are simply two sides of the same intensifying and perfecting pattern of technology.⁶⁰⁴ Returning to Alter, we are left to ask of theology, what Christian hope is there really for de-escalation and re-membering (the opposite of disaggregation) in an age of technological intensification?

If retardment or reversal of escalation is one opening for decolonisation, as it breaks or slows down the links between attention colonised action and outcome, we can also recognise a need for a kind of obfuscation or self-effacement, which is itself a certain kind of poverty. Caroline Busta has argued, “With digital platforms transforming legacy countercultural activity into profitable, high-engagement content, being countercultural no longer means being counter-hegemonic. What logic could possibly be upended by punks, goths, gabbers, or neo-pagans when the internet, a massively lucrative space of capitalization, profits off the personal expression and political conflict of its users?”⁶⁰⁵ For this reason, Busta argues, “To be truly countercultural today, in a time of tech hegemony, one has to, above all, betray the platform, which may come in the form of betraying or divesting from your public online self.”⁶⁰⁶ And finally, “what does today's counter-

⁶⁰⁴ Bickerton and Accetti have recently argued, in their book *Technopopulism*, that an increased atomisation of persons has created feelings of vulnerability in the populace which makes technocratic populists that promise the delivery of security by effective remote means, very attractive. While my project is also concerned with the disaggregation and atomisation of persons in the techno-culture, I am spending little time attempting to directly understand the psychological state of citizens. Rather I am attempting to view broadly the shape of the culture and to isolate the pragmatic means by which persons may move from colonisation to effective liberty. Christopher J. Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi, *Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁶⁰⁵ Caroline Busta, “The Internet Didn’t Kill Counterculture—You Just Won’t Find it on Instagram,” *Document*, 14 Jan 2021, <https://www.documentjournal.com/2021/01/the-internet-didnt-kill-counterculture-you-just-wont-find-it-on-instagram/>.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

hegemonic culture look like? It's not particularly interested in being seen...But it does demonstrate a hunger for freedom—freedom from the attention economy, from atomization, and the extractive logic of mainstream communication."⁶⁰⁷ To betray or divest from your public online self (in many if not most cases) is to betray or divest from your IRL (in real life) self. *The economic and social costs to self-effacement in age of attention colonisation and surveillance capitalism are severe.* Who are you if you are not found both by those persons operating and utilising the technosystem? *You are, in fact, a nonperson on the underside of a dominant technosystem.* However, it is important to recall a larger function for countercultural movements, which is their carrying or stirring up of an alternative ethos, norms, and values, through which the larger culture may be affected and ameliorated. Retardation and self-effacement as pillars of a countercultural or counter-paradigmatic movement are not yet, in of themselves, a prescription in this work, so much as openings or values by which a larger series of practices may be ordered. Together, retardation of the behavioural data being captured from ubiquitous devices and sensors and counter-hegemonic self-effacement which shirks always being captured and commodified by the technosystem, might be understood as reflecting a kind of theology of descent (or, as I will ultimately refer to as a theology of human condescension or accommodation).⁶⁰⁸ This de-intensification or devitalization is not meant here as toward complete cancellation or erasure, but rather as a way of effacing oneself from the capturing glare of surveillance

⁶⁰⁷ Busta, "Internet Didn't Kill Counterculture."

⁶⁰⁸ A theology of human condescension, which I will begin to develop during Part II and culminate in my term metapoverty (Chapter 7), echoes the concept of Christ's accommodation discussed by theologians, since Origen and Augustine. Condescension/accommodation refers to God's voluntary setting aside of certain advantages, abilities or opportunities in regard to those less privileged, whom he loves. My own encounter with discussion of Christ's condescension came from Bonaventure's *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. E. Gurney Salter, The Temple Classics (J.M. Dent, 1904), 78. "O marvellous condescension of God, that doth so readily incline unto His servants!" There is also an irony in adapting the term. The term theology of human condescension indicates both a sincere course of action (in following Christ), and, in its juxtaposition with God's ultimate condescension, a recognition of hubris when we are not recognising or appreciating our own human finitude.

capitalism and toward the unwinding of acceleration. In this way it is possible to discredit and undermine techno-capitalistic escalation and attention colonisation.

Furthermore, a theology of human condescension or accommodation (which, again, we will return to) would not argue so much the leveling down of the human, as much as retraction or re-grounding of the greater extensions of persons. This is an opposite action of the technoculture's prompting and thirst for endless self-expression/self-declaration, which contributes toward techno-capitalistic escalation and is synonymous with the aims of the tech hegemony which Busta has described. Rather, within a theology of human condescension or accommodation, the aim is always drawing back which provides an equivalent space for other rewilding within the technosystem. Rewilding is essentially the process of re-politicising other "noise" in the digital communications ecosystem—be it the noise of quirky, inefficient and suboptimal humans, the poor, or other nonpersons or nonhuman things. It is a celebration of contingency, roughness, and imperfection. This process of rewilding/re-politicising admits of both *focal practices*, to use Borgmann's term, but also admits of a kind of anarchic wind into the technosystem itself—a force which measures of mastery and control are sensitive.

Conclusion

Toward concluding this chapter, consider a scene from Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, when main protagonist, Guy Montag, is on the subway attempting to memorise Matthew 6:28 ("Consider the lilies of the field...") but is continually interrupted by an advertisement for Denham's Dentrifrice.⁶⁰⁹ In the end, Montag runs off the subway with the voice of the advertisement lingering after him. Montag wanted to contemplate a verse which in turn urges contemplation—to recognise God's provision for things great and

⁶⁰⁹ Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1976; repr., London: HarperVoyager, 2008), 101-4.

small from what is evident in one's immediate environment. But he simply cannot outwill or escape his environment. Given the inevitability of the subway car for aggressive, manipulative advertising, should Montag have simply joined in with the others, tapping his feet and mouthing the tune? There are those, more optimistic of the egalitarian and emancipatory opportunities of technology, that will argue that it is better to learn to adapt to present and incoming sophisticated and powerful technologies. I believe, while this sentiment is understandable, that given what I call techno-capitalistic escalation and the propensities of the technoculture toward incessant commodification, that this is a grave mistake. On the other hand, how is Montag to participate in the larger culture when his attention and self will be inevitably colonised (nudged, tuned, and herded) and contemplation found near impossible? Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey* resisted the Sirens by having his men lash him to the mast of his boat, holding him back from the irresistible allure of their song.⁶¹⁰ He also ordered his men to push wax into their ears to block the sound and avoid inevitable death. So too, this project seeks measures which may resist the Sirens' call of increasingly persuasive technologies in order to reform (that is, reorder) the broader technosystem, whilst (and this is a crucial difference) becoming *more*, not less, permeable to the poor and the suffering planet. In this way, we seek not blinders, Edenic escape or pre-technological enclaves—almost the opposite. We seek measures which ultimately reground ourselves, in ways re-burden ourselves, and in so doing reconcile the bonds of our social life.

As a project interested to outline the beginnings of a liberation theology of technology, we are also ultimately seeking to understand if liberation theology can meaningfully speak to such conditions. Our close inspection of attention colonisation in

⁶¹⁰ Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Martin Hammond (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 130, ProQuest Ebook Central.

Chapter 2 and the resources of contemporary philosophy of technology in Chapters 3 and 4 have pointed us in a particular direction. Given this understanding of contemporary techno-culture, we have identified potential openings for the themes of poverty and contemplation, both which could be understood under the larger, albeit vague, theology of human condescension or accommodation. Given its primacy in Latin American liberation theology, and the remaining space for my inquiry, I will focus exclusively, in the theological Part II of this thesis, upon the theme of poverty.

We begin in Chapter 6 by exploring, in depth, Gutiérrez' view of poverty and whether, in the classic liberationist tradition, there is entry for the sorts of conditions we are exploring. From the end of Chapter 6 and through Chapter 7, the views of Gutiérrez and Borgmann on (advanced) poverty, as well as the condition of attention colonisation, are placed in dialogue. Ultimately, in Part II, I am concerned to understand how should poverty be understood in an age of technology? Can poverty (including forms of elective austerity/voluntary poverty and re-burdenment) help retard techno-capitalistic escalation and by what means might persons reclaim attention in order to manifoldly discover the significance of others, including the brutally poor?

Part II:
Theology of Human Condensation

Chapter 6

Gutiérrez and Borgmann on Poverty Today

In 2007, Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote, “Now, we are coming to understand poverty as the result of the way that we have built and maintained our societies.”⁶¹¹ This pithy statement points to helpful contributions liberation theology and Gutiérrez will make for our project, as well as what will become one of its critical limitations. Positively, we will see in the work of Gutiérrez, that liberation theology remains always alerted to the consequences of broader systems, or ways of being. Second, liberation theology, as we will come to see, is concerned for certain things of outstanding, and often overlooked, significance. Bold articulations, such as *a preferential option for the poor*, will necessarily agitate against other competing assertions or assumptions of significance. Such assertions accompany a demand for a reordering of values and an augmentation, subversion and/or replacement of unjust structures, systems. Third, Gutiérrez, we will see, is careful to avoid unifactorial explanations for complex conditions. Instead, liberation theology admits of manifold causes for the forms of suffering and injustice present. This is helpful when technology, understood broadly, is both a way of emancipation from early death and ignorance, and also, as I have described, techno-capitalistic escalation, with its propensity for harm along the intensifying lines we have described.

In terms of limitations, Gutiérrez, whilst he argues that suffering, alienation, and early death of the poor are the result of the ways humans have built their societies, he almost entirely omits, in his analysis, any larger conception for how systems of technology (and any ontology thereof), perpetuate conditions of poverty. This includes poverty which is outside of, or on the margins of, advanced technological societies, as well as emergent

⁶¹¹ Gutiérrez, “Liberation Theology for the Twenty-First Century,” 49.

and novel forms of suffering or poverty within affluent advanced technological societies themselves. Of course, much of this is a consequence of Gutiérrez' context, focus and audience. However, it also appears to reflect the manner in which Gutiérrez envisions history and his view of progress, of which technology (or technosystem writ large) would be just one, very pronounced, example.⁶¹² My thesis maintains, however, with Borgmann and Feenberg, that whilst a culture of technology is certainly and crucially intertwined with certain progress and affluence, technology also carries with it a way being that is consequential for the planet and persons. As such, systems of technology, or the broader culture of technology, should be investigated for the manner in which poverty also exists within its borders and certainly beyond. We must not allow the accomplishments of technology be lent a permanent glow of emancipatory promise, since as Feenberg has been helpful to point out, technocracy exercises power in the technosystem, and the interests, values, demands and the context of the designers is embedded in the layers of devices. Borgmann has shown that there is a constraining pattern in a larger culture of technology which persons are drawn up with. As Borgmann will help us to recognise, if we do not identify and be wary of the harms of our present techno-culture (in the midst of accompanying affluence and examples of progress), it would serve to unthinkingly extend techno-capitalistic escalation and attention colonisation to, as yet, less colonised things.

In his recent polemic, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World*, Jonathan Crary decries recent uproar over surveillance capitalism (i.e., Zuboff) which does not endeavour to understand the larger context which creates this “rogue” form of capitalism. He writes, “It is a deflection of critique that affirms the permanence and

⁶¹² Castillo argues Gutiérrez takes a language of domination as normative in the earth/human relationship. See: Daniel P. Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology* (Maryknoll, MA: Orbis Books, 2019), 32. Also, Crary will summarise how a similar modern European mindset was an unfortunate feature of anti-systemic/liberationist work of the 1960s and onwards. Jonathan Crary, *Scorched: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World* (London: Verso, 2022), 33-34.

necessity of the existing underlying arrangements.”⁶¹³ Crary urges against simply reinforcing existing technological hegemonies. Rather, he argues,

What is needed is exploration and creative receptivity to all the resources and practices developed over the long history of human societies for thousands of years. There are enormous reserves of knowledge and insight, from all eras, about techniques of subsistence and the fostering of community that need to be recovered and adapted for present needs, especially from cultures in the Global South and indigenous peoples. Realistic strategies of resistance also require the invention of new ways of living.⁶¹⁴

Gutiérrez has critiqued predatory harms perpetuated through the way we have built our societies, but overlooks the technological condition which informs or shapes these ultimately predatory actions and/or neglect. This includes an embrace of the evergreen promise of technology with its attendant view of ascending progress (and capitalistic underpinnings).

This important omission of Gutiérrez, however, is far from fatal for my project. Gutiérrez provides a most helpful method which is precisely the sort of radical reimagining that Crary urges. Gutiérrez’ theology has been born of a seemingly dissonant combination of factors. He begins with incredible fidelity to the suffering in his location (as *locus theologicus*), shows an openness to novel contemporary tools of analysis, all whilst showing unfailing constancy to the resources and eschatological horizon of his faith and tradition. He will resource, as Crary has called for, the “reserves of knowledge and insight”—especially the hope and love of God which is good news for the suffering, and which prompts outward action and attestation for the liberation (salvation) received.

Part II of this project will explore how Gutiérrez’ view of poverty, emerging from a late twentieth-century Latin American context, relates to or informs the experiences of citizens at the epicentres of an affluent culture of technology today. Who are the poor in

⁶¹³ Crary, *Scorched Earth*, 108.

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 121-22.

an advanced technological age, in an age of techno-capitalistic escalation? I have said we are interested to somehow retard techno-capitalistic escalation. I have asked what Christian hope is there really for de-escalation and re-remembering (the opposite of disaggregation) in an age of technological intensification. By what means might persons reclaim attention in order to manifoldly discover the significance of other, which we are not normally confronted. Part II, after careful engagement with Gutiérrez, will ultimately argue that poverty, as elective austerity and *re-burdenment*, does indeed have significant promise for the unwinding of techno-capitalistic escalation and the reintroduction of persons to the world of the materially poor.

In Chapter 6, we begin in section one by considering in depth, what are Gutiérrez' conceptions of poverty and how have his definitions expanded in light of emerging liberationist movements. This should help reveal, to what extent (or not), the conditions of the attentionally colonised carry substantive connective tissue to the traditions and central concerns of liberation theology. We will conclude this chapter, in section two, by outlining Borgmann's 'advanced poverty,' as preparation for an important comparative analysis of Gutiérrez and Borgmann's views of poverty in Chapter 7. Ultimately, the analysis in Chapter 6 will allow me to unpack, in Chapter 7, the principal theological findings of this thesis. This includes making clearer the taxon surrounding poverty in a culture of technology and the relationship between its constitutive parts. How do the conditions of poverty, classically understood by early Latin American liberation theologians, relate to the kinds of suffering and predation we are considering in this thesis? We will explore whether Gutiérrez' understandings of poverty, when applied in a distinctive context, may assist in the modification (that is, thwarting) of techno-capitalistic escalation, and in the triaging of attention, in a way that preserves something of essential concern for liberation theology itself, the preferential option for the materially poor.

I. Gutiérrez' Understandings of the Poor and Nonperson

The Equivocality of Poverty

Gutiérrez is helpful to acknowledge that poverty is an equivocal term⁶¹⁵ and argues there are two reasons for poverty's ambiguity. One is the confusion that biblical accounts provide in both presenting a positive, spiritual aspect to poverty, as well as a negative, subhuman aspect.⁶¹⁶ Theological and ecclesial movements have, in his opinion, enhanced the confusion. Second, Gutiérrez acknowledges the equivocality of poverty is also due to the fact that definitions of poverty have evolved or expanded over time. He writes, "Not having access to certain cultural, social and political values, for example, is today part of the poverty that people hope to abolish."⁶¹⁷ Therefore, poverty is a term, it seems fair to say, that is approximated within contemporary understandings of human dignity and basic wellbeing (its opportunities and limits) available within its given point in time.

There is a kind of limited elasticity to Gutiérrez' use of the term poverty. He stretches out from certain core formulations amid a multiplicity of tangential terms. In order to explicate this, I will approach his understanding of poverty in the following ways: First, I will outline his core broad categories of poverty which he grounds from within biblical accounts. Second, I will show the expansion of these definitions in three representative works, noting important evolutions in his thinking as it regards poverty.

The Core Categories of Poverty

In 2015's *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez summarises three distinctions for the term "poor," that is, first, *real (or material) poverty*, second, *spiritual poverty*, and third, "*poverty as commitment in solidarity with the poor*

⁶¹⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 288.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 288-90.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 289.

and in protest against poverty.”⁶¹⁸ Gutiérrez credits these conceptions to Latin American theologians from the mid-1960s (of which he was undoubtedly one) which were then authoritatively picked up by the 1968 CELAM conference in Medellín and made central to his *A Theology of Liberation*.⁶¹⁹ For Gutiérrez, these categories have not substantively changed in these 50 years. While the categories have remained fixed, the definitions, as we will see, especially for real/material poverty, have shown tremendous pliancy.

Gutiérrez begins by describing real (or material) poverty in *A Theology of Liberation* as “the lack of economic goods necessary for a human life worthy of the name”⁶²⁰ but also extends it, as was mentioned, to include “not having access to certain cultural, social, and political values.” He also states that “material poverty is a subhuman situation”⁶²¹ and “concretely, to be poor means to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others, not to know you are being exploited, not to know that you are a person.”⁶²² What then, one should ask, is the organising principle in operation here?

The principle for determining real/material poverty is discovered in Gutiérrez’ exegesis of biblical poverty where he writes, “In the Bible poverty is a *scandalous condition* [italics mine] inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God.”⁶²³ The Old Testament terms for the poor, indigent (*ébyôn*), weak (*dal*), bent over (*ani*), and the New Testament term wretched (*ptokós*) “express a degrading human situation” and “the climate in which poverty is described is one of indignation.”⁶²⁴ Poverty is not simply denounced but actively repudiated.⁶²⁵ Here we understand a scandalous condition is one that somehow defaces human dignity. And on what biblical

⁶¹⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Where Will the Poor Sleep?,” in *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation*, trans. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 88.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

⁶²⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 288.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 289.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Ibid., 291.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 292.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 294.

basis is Gutiérrez understanding human dignity? Generally speaking, in *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez resources: (1) the Exodus story in its liberation of the Israelites from slavery, alienation, and exploitation that contradict human dignity. (2) The mandate of Genesis centred in *Imago Dei* (Gen. 1:26; 2:15). And (3) the human as sacrament of God, that is, when we encounter others, we also encounter God (e.g., Matt. 25:35-40).⁶²⁶ While on one hand, “scandalous conditions inimical to human dignity” will always remain somewhat pliable, as we will see later, poverty nevertheless coalesces, for Gutiérrez, around certain repeated nexus.

Spiritual poverty, for Gutiérrez, is a *spiritual childhood*⁶²⁷ which he defines by quoting Gelin’s 1953 *The Poor of Yahweh*, as “the ability to welcome God, an openness to God, a willingness to be used by God, a humility before God.”⁶²⁸ *Anaw*, in the plural *anawim*, is the most common biblical term used to designate the spiritually poor. From the time of Zephaniah (e.g., Zeph. 2:3; 3:12-13), poor took on a spiritual connotation and “understood in this way poverty is opposed to pride, to an attitude of self-sufficiency; on the other hand, it is synonymous with faith, with abandonment and trust in the Lord.”⁶²⁹ It is also a prerequisite of moving closer to God (Isa. 66:2).⁶³⁰ By Gutiérrez’ account, spiritual poverty is quintessentially expressed in the New Testament in the Matthean Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1).⁶³¹ He writes, “God’s communication with us is a gift of love; to receive this gift it is necessary to be poor, a spiritual child.”⁶³² Gutiérrez, while never denying its place in the biblical accounts, finds spiritual poverty problematic when it results in “sacralizing misery and injustice and is therefore preaching resignation to it.”⁶³³

⁶²⁶ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 294-95.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶³¹ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁶³² *Ibid.*

⁶³³ *Ibid.*, 298.

The existence of both a poverty that deserves repudiation *and yet* another poverty that is a precondition for the Word of God, prompts a third further definition, which carries meaning from both the prior definitions (and relates well to praxis).

The third category of poverty is *a commitment in solidarity with the poor and in protest against poverty*. The biblical basis here, for Gutiérrez, is the voluntary impoverishment or *kenosis* (self-emptying) of Christ, who for the sake of the world became a slave (Phil. 2:6), became poor (2 Cor. 8:9), and entered death and rose again (Gal. 5:1; Rom. 6:1-11).⁶³⁴ This was not to canonize poverty but done from love and solidarity for those that suffer. This is a Christian poverty in that Christ's followers would pattern their lives after his example.

For Gutiérrez, it is not enough to somehow love the poor abstractly or to carry on with a spiritual poverty that is separated from the scandal of material poverty. Rather, it is necessary to substantiate one's evangelical commitment through direct action and protest against poverty. He writes, "It is a struggle against human selfishness and everything that divides men and enables there to be rich and poor, possessors and dispossessed, oppressors and oppressed."⁶³⁵ It is difficult to always understand in Gutiérrez, how precisely such a synthesis of voluntary solidarity with the materially poor and spiritual poverty occur together. In his first edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez suggests that when the Church protests and moves against material poverty, *then* it can preach its own spiritual poverty of openness to the gospel—the Church would only have credibility in that order. Is he always sequencing, a priori, the entering of the world of the poor? Or is this simply the most evangelically credible way? Regardless, it seems fair to say that Gutiérrez is pointing to a form of active commitment to the materially poor, which is itself a real

⁶³⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 300.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*

sacrifice to forms of comfort, security, status, enrichment, and, perhaps in certain cases, health and wellbeing. It is also important to point out that Gutiérrez is not, today, arguing that such solidarity should regress persons, in toto, to material poverty. In 2007, Gutiérrez wrote that the world does not need one more poor person. He writes, “We need to take on some form of poverty, some personal poverty, some austerity...The quest is not for us to be poor. Poverty is a scandal; it is never good. We should enter that world to get to know it, not to imitate it. We should enter that world to become committed—to fight against it.”⁶³⁶

Breaking down material poverty. Having outlined Gutiérrez’ three categories and basic definitions of poverty, we will look at the way in which material poverty itself can be seen as grouped into four general categories in his work. Beginning in the original 1973 edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, there are two underlying understandings that propel Gutiérrez. The first is that especially beginning in the Enlightenment, from intellectuals such as Descartes to Hegel and Marx, and in the tremendous developments of science and technology, there has emerged a powerful emancipatory project for humanity.⁶³⁷ For Gutiérrez, specifically in following Hegel and Marx, it extends further to the development of an entirely new society where persons are free from all servitude.⁶³⁸ Second, this manifold emancipatory project has not, Gutiérrez recognises, extended its gains to all peoples uniformly⁶³⁹ and in many cases has been furthered through the oppression of others.⁶⁴⁰ This is, it seems, where the scandal of real/material poverty is for Gutiérrez. It is not a scandal of, for example, the woeful lifespans of first-century Roman

⁶³⁶ Gutiérrez, “Liberation Theology for the Twenty-First Century,” 56.

⁶³⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 27-32.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

children (half of which were dead by age ten).⁶⁴¹ It is in relation to the progress possessed, at least by some, *today*.

This gives us a way to categorise Gutiérrez' definitions and descriptions of real/material poverty in terms of: (a) conditions of unnecessary misery today, (b) deprivation from certain enrichment, (c) the predatory abuse and/or neglect of persons, and (d) the spoiling of a greater society.⁶⁴² It is important to note, these subcategories are not discreet but overlap and inform each other. I will briefly illustrate each in turn. First, as it relates to *conditions of unnecessary misery today*, we find Gutiérrez describe in *A Theology of Liberation*: material insufficiency,⁶⁴³ physical misery,⁶⁴⁴ hunger,⁶⁴⁵ the satisfaction of the most elementary needs,⁶⁴⁶ despoliation,⁶⁴⁷ lack of necessary economic goods.⁶⁴⁸ In terms of *deprivation from certain enrichment*, we can place Gutiérrez' descriptions of poverty as: lack of knowledge and acquisition of culture,⁶⁴⁹ ignorance,⁶⁵⁰ including ignorance of one's exploitation.⁶⁵¹ In terms of the *predatory abuse and/or neglect of persons* we can place Gutiérrez' descriptions of poverty as: domination,⁶⁵² dependency,⁶⁵³ oppression,⁶⁵⁴ exploitation,⁶⁵⁵ servitude,⁶⁵⁶ paternalism,⁶⁵⁷ being

⁶⁴¹ Mary Beard, "Pompeii Skeletons Reveal Secrets of Roman Family Life," BBC News, 14 December, 2010, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11952322>.

⁶⁴² I am here thinking of Gutiérrez' belief in the building of a new just society and the Reign of God in history. I am also bringing to bear Scott's use of the term 'greater society.' See Ch. 5, p. 164.

⁶⁴³ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 22.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁶⁵² *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

disinherited,⁶⁵⁸ injustice,⁶⁵⁹ social evils,⁶⁶⁰ moral misery,⁶⁶¹ the despised race,⁶⁶² the margined,⁶⁶³ and plundered.⁶⁶⁴ Finally, the fourth grouping I am identifying is *the spoiling of a greater society*. By this I am referring to those impoverishing conditions which are not the result of direct and specific abuse or neglect, but rather are in the broader rejection of certain societal (especially political and economic) prerogatives which have been enjoyed by many, especially during and following the Enlightenment. These include “the most fundamental human aspirations—liberty, dignity, [and] the possibility for personal fulfilment for all.”⁶⁶⁵ Here we would include in poverty the broader conception of alienation, especially as Marx would have envisioned it as separation of essential aspects of the self, including alienation from one’s ‘species-essence’ and from others.⁶⁶⁶ For this grouping, Gutiérrez has described: the breach of friendship with God and others,⁶⁶⁷ alienation,⁶⁶⁸ and lacking access to social and political values.⁶⁶⁹

Enlarging the Meanings: Three Representative Works

Let us now look at key developments in Gutiérrez’ understanding of poverty in three representative works.

***The Power of the Poor in History (1983)*.** *The Power of the Poor in History* is a volume of eight works written by Gutiérrez between 1969 until 1979. They represent a vehement and ardent defence of a liberation theology centralised on the poor, and for

⁶⁵⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 115.

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, 205.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁶⁶ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. and trans. Martin Milligan (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007), 72-84.

⁶⁶⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 35.

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 89, 202, 300.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 289, 47-49.

certain tools of analysis privileged in *A Theology of Liberation* for comprehending the very causes of poverty in Latin America. In this compendium, Gutiérrez maintains and develops his earlier categories and definitions of poverty, however, there are three noteworthy additions in Gutiérrez' thought—the right of the poor to think, his reception of new forms of liberation theology beyond the poor of Latin America and the conception of the 'nonperson.'

First, Gutiérrez furthers his description of poverty, in *The Power of the Poor in History*, with his conceptualisation on the *right of the poor to think*. By this, Gutiérrez means “the right to express—to plumb, comprehend, come to appreciate, and then insist upon—that other right an oppressive system denies them: the right to a human life.”⁶⁷⁰ Here we find an important connection between Gutiérrez' focus on the experiences of the poor in Latin America and the then burgeoning liberation theology movements. He writes, “The right to be, to exist, is the first demand of those whom James H. Cone...calls the victims of history. Of course, recognition of blacks' existence is sure to be subversive, hence disquieting for the dominating classes.”⁶⁷¹ A right to existence is not simply here a right to the most basic material needs of food, shelter, clothing but the right to engage in human society and to be recognised in return. This engagement and recognition includes theological discourse where one's own questions, indeed pleading, in engagement of scripture and religious tradition, are welcomed.

This leads us to the second addition—that being Gutiérrez' reception of and work toward the broadening of liberation theology. In terms of reception, Gutiérrez says, “Our 'rough draft' of the theology of liberation stands to gain a great deal from encounters still in the offing.”⁶⁷² He acknowledges new liberation theology movements (Black, Hispanic-

⁶⁷⁰ Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 90.

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, 65.

American, African, Latin American, Asian theology, Feminist) where people are attempting to think and live their faith from their own difficult circumstances. He writes, “For the first time in many centuries, theological reflection rooted in the world of poverty and oppression is arising from many sides.”⁶⁷³ In terms of working toward the broadening of liberation theology, we have just observed Gutiérrez’ formulation of the “right to think” which is about full representation and participation by persons. This is a term that can be seen as an attempt to connect a myriad of liberationist movements from diverse circumstances of “poverty” in terms of physical misery and economic means, political rights, and forms of oppression. But Gutiérrez’ acknowledgement of the expansion of liberation theology is not simply about *existing* forms of poverty and oppression but also *surreptitious and emerging* forms today. He writes, “Oppression ever ancient and ever new! It wears new guises today.”⁶⁷⁴ These statements, it would seem, *reflect a position opposed to canonising only particular historical circumstances of poverty and oppression, but rather to find fraternity with those, even those yet recognised, who suffer.*

The final addition to investigate, in *The Power of the Poor in History*, is his key concept of the ‘nonperson.’ One may notice that, in summarising Gutiérrez’ descriptions of poverty thus far, I have not yet included terms such as dehumanisation, even though there are many examples in the texts. For example, he has spoken of subhuman situations,⁶⁷⁵ of depersonalisation,⁶⁷⁶ and failing and/or refusing to see people as human beings at all.⁶⁷⁷ All of Gutiérrez’ descriptions of the active degrading of human beings and the resulting class of dehumanised persons consummate most pronounced in his term *nonperson*, hence I am introducing it here. For Gutiérrez, in Latin America, the nonperson

⁶⁷³ Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 204.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶⁷⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 289.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁶⁷⁷ Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 97.

is “the person whom the prevailing social order fails to recognize as a person—the poor, the exploited, the ones systematically and legally despoiled of their humanness, the ones who scarcely know they are persons at all.”⁶⁷⁸ Elsewhere he rewords this to say the nonperson is “the human being who is not considered human by the present social order”⁶⁷⁹ and adds the examples of “marginalized ethnic groups, and despised cultures.”⁶⁸⁰

This provocative term reflects what these poor are in the eyes of the oppressor (and also invariably how they have often come to see themselves), rather than a statement of their actual value. To this point, Gutiérrez says, “When we say ‘nonperson’ or ‘nonhuman being,’ we are not using these terms in an ontological sense. We do not mean that the interlocutor of liberation theology is actually a nonentity. We are using this term to denote those human beings who are considered less than human by society, because that society is based on privileges arrogated by a minority.”⁶⁸¹ It is possible then to see that there are three elements to the world of the nonperson for Gutiérrez, these are: (a) those who are carrying out (actively or implicitly) the erasure and/or degradation of other’s essential worth or dignity, (b) those whose humanity is being (or has been) forgotten, and (c) the precise societal rights and privileges that, when absent, result in such erasure and degradation.

Gutiérrez argues that in Europe or the United States the church is preoccupied in its dialogue with nonbelievers amidst a secularising society, whereas the challenge for the church, in a largely Christian Latin America, is engagement with the nonperson.⁶⁸² He points out that the poor in Latin America are not questioning religion so much as their own misanthropic conditions. This then leads Gutiérrez to narrow his theological focus to the

⁶⁷⁸ Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 57.

⁶⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.*, 57.

questions: “How [does one] proclaim God as Father in a world that is inhumane? What can it mean to tell a nonperson that he or she is God’s child?”⁶⁸³ Elsewhere he furthers this to say, “Our question is how to tell the nonperson, the nonhuman, that God is love, and that this love makes us all brothers and sisters.”⁶⁸⁴ Here, Gutiérrez is choosing not to think and reflect on behalf of the “lords of this world” but instead the “downtrodden human cultures”⁶⁸⁵ whose essential value have been pillaged.

Gutiérrez’ work is, to his thinking, reversing theological thought which has, in effect, underwritten oppression and stripped persons of human dignity. As we have explored in Chapter 2, he cites one of the most eminent theologians of the *Conquista*, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who argued the Indians were, by their nature, inferior, and therefore their subjection was warranted.⁶⁸⁶ He writes, “All this was expounded brilliantly, with abundant citations, and presented as traditional doctrine. It is a well-known strategy, and has been used in our own day. It is a theological justification for the oppression carried out by the *encomendero* class... We have had a good many Sepúlvedas since.”⁶⁸⁷ Here then, we can see that Gutiérrez’ project is to restore value to those treated as nonpersons. If Sepúlveda’s theological efforts helped declassify the Indians, reassigning them to a degraded order, then Gutiérrez can be seen as moving in the opposite direction. That is to say, these so-called nonhumans are instead, for Gutiérrez, the carriers of tremendous value in the economy of God, are worthy of full participation in the privileges and responsibilities of humanity’s modern emancipations, and are themselves central for the envisioning of a greater society.

⁶⁸³ Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 57.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

A Theology of Liberation, Revised Edition (1988). In Gutiérrez' revised *A Theology of Liberation*, in addition to incorporating gender-inclusive language and a reworking of at least one key chapter, a substantial new introduction reappraises liberation theology and concedes certain updates in Gutiérrez' thinking. In this section we will consider two important developments in this new introduction that have bearing on his definitions of poverty. The first being a further conceptual bridging toward other global liberation theology movements and the forms of poverty they endure. Second, relatedly, a further consideration on the complex and surreptitious nature of poverty.

As in *The Power of the Poor in History*, Gutiérrez attests to the important evolution of liberation theologies around the world. He describes again the expansion in “Black, Hispanic, and Amerindian theologies in the United States, theologies arising in the complex contexts of Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific, and the especially fruitful thinking of those who have adopted the feminist perspective.”⁶⁸⁸ Gutiérrez connects these movements with a global and historic “*irruption of the poor*.”⁶⁸⁹ Viewed collectively, these are peoples who refuse to be erased. He writes, “Our time bears the imprint of the new presence of those who in fact used to be ‘absent’ from our society and from the church. By ‘absent’ I mean: of little or no importance, and without the opportunity to give expression themselves to their sufferings, their comradeships, their plans, their hopes.”⁶⁹⁰ This ‘new presence,’ for Gutiérrez, culminates to where the forgotten “have gradually been turning into active agents of their own destiny”⁶⁹¹ and changing their circumstances in the world. This formulation of a ‘new presence’ for the absent can be seen as another articulation of the ‘nonperson’ we considered. In terms of the nonperson, in the revised edition he also writes, “our partners in dialogue are the poor, those who are

⁶⁸⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., *xix*.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, *xx*.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.*, *xxi*.

‘nonpersons’—that is, those who are not considered to be human beings with full rights, beginning with the right to life and to freedom in various spheres.”⁶⁹² But, importantly, are these marginalised, be them those absent or considered nonhuman, impoverished in the same ways as Gutiérrez’ earlier descriptions of material poverty—for example, hunger and lack of necessary economic goods?

To answer this, let us consider a revised definition of poverty that Gutiérrez uses in this new introduction. He writes,

In the final analysis, poverty means death: lack of food and housing, the inability to attend properly to health and education needs, the exploitation of workers, permanent unemployment, the lack of respect for one’s human dignity, and unjust limitations placed on personal freedoms in the areas of self-expression, politics, and religion. Poverty is a situation that destroys peoples, families, and individuals.⁶⁹³

This definition is important, for here we have represented the subcategories of Gutiérrez’ real/material poverty I have earlier proposed. We see conditions of unnecessary misery today (lack of food and housing), deprivation from certain enrichment (in health and education), the predatory abuse and/or neglect of persons (exploitation of workers), and the spoiling of a greater society (permanent unemployment, limitations on personal freedom, lack of respect for one’s human dignity, and the destroying of peoples, families, and individuals). In reaffirming the various subcategories, it is clear that Gutiérrez remains committed to his conception of poverty along these lines. In his expanded conceptualisations, such as the ‘right to think,’ ‘nonperson,’ and now the ‘absent,’ we can see these broad concepts can be intersected with the subcategories I have earlier identified. *This allows for a multiplicity of historical (socio-cultural, economic, and political) circumstances to exist under poverty.* In other words, beyond simply lacking the most basic material needs (i.e., food, shelter, clothing, etc.), there is also in poverty what could

⁶⁹² Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., xxix.

⁶⁹³ *Ibid.*, xxi.

be described as an active *ghosting process* of the living. Human beings being dissolved, in a myriad of ways, of presence, of certain agency, of standing, right value, and participation in culture. This is, for Gutiérrez, *also* an impoverishing dehumanisation which he takes pains to now acknowledge.

By expanding poverty in this way, Gutiérrez is open to encountering poverty and oppression beyond what has been previously understood or recognised. He admits this in terms of the conditions in which women were living. He says, “We in Latin America are only now beginning to wake up to the unacceptable and inhuman character of their situation.”⁶⁹⁴ Gutiérrez is available for a new awareness, to ‘waking up,’ to adjusting the horizons of liberation according to “historical vicissitudes of our peoples.”⁶⁹⁵ This willingness to open up to a complex world of suffering beyond normative boundaries is stated best at the close of the revised introduction when Gutiérrez writes that the task is “to expand our view—beyond our little world, our ideas and discussions, our interests, our hard times, and –why not say it?—beyond our reasons and legitimate rights.”⁶⁹⁶ Here the point is not to be any less concerned for the injustices in one’s purview, as one presently understands them, but to simultaneously join with all who seek release from disfiguring servitude, *even if this challenges one’s own earlier conceptions.*

The second, and final, development to be highlighted in the revised introduction to *A Theology of Liberation*, is Gutiérrez’ further admission to the complex *and* surreptitious nature of poverty. First, regarding its complexity, Gutiérrez concedes that in Latin America he previously placed “an almost exclusive emphasis on the social and economic aspect of poverty...but I also [now] insist that we must be attentive to other aspects of poverty as well.”⁶⁹⁷ Gutiérrez has been reminded that being poor is also “a way of living,

⁶⁹⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., xxii.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, xliv.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, xlv.

⁶⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, xxi.

thinking, loving, praying, believing, and hoping.”⁶⁹⁸ By reading death, oppression, and misery on every aspect of the poor it was easy to overlook a “human depth and a toughness that are a promise of life” and “this perception represents one of the most profound changes in our way of seeing the reality of poverty and consequently in the overall judgment we pass on it.”⁶⁹⁹ Furthermore, Gutiérrez admits (as we reviewed in Chapter 1) that certain analytical tools (e.g., dependency theory) proved insufficient.⁷⁰⁰ Here too, Gutiérrez displays flexibility when he writes, “The tools used in this analysis vary with time and according to their proven effectiveness.”⁷⁰¹ He expresses receptivity to psychology, ethnology, and anthropology as well as “attention to cultural factors [that] will help us to enter into mentalities and basic attitudes that explain important aspects of the reality with which we are faced.”⁷⁰² Gutiérrez is acknowledging the multifarious nature of human relations as well as the tangled nature and causes of poverty. Or said best, “Poverty is a complex human condition, and its causes must also be complex.”⁷⁰³

To the second point, Gutiérrez further concedes there can be a surreptitious nature to poverty. This is illustrated in his acknowledgment of the conditions of suffering in which women presently live. He says, “One thing that makes it very difficult to grasp its true character is its hiddenness, for it has become something habitual, part of everyday life and cultural tradition.”⁷⁰⁴ While he admits this for the particular case of women in Latin America, it is not difficult to see a broader acknowledgement that forms of oppression can exist in the quotidian aspects of our lives, below a level of immediate conscious reflection.⁷⁰⁵ And in connecting to the complexity of poverty and its causes, one can see

⁶⁹⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., xxi.

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, xxii.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰² *Ibid.*, xxix-xxv.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*, xxv.

⁷⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, xxii.

⁷⁰⁵ This has obvious connection to our work with Borgmann and the surreptitious nature of captivity and deprivation in a culture of technology—a connection to which we will return.

how the tools and levels of analysis employed are critical for illuminating that which has become habituated and normalised. Good-faith engagement with new perspectives is critical for seeing what was earlier unrecognised. Gutiérrez writes, “In this whole matter I have found it very helpful to enter into dialogue with theologies developed in settings different from our own...I have learned much about situations different from the Latin American. At the same time, I have gained a better understanding and appreciation of aspects of our people...I have come to see with new eyes.”⁷⁰⁶ Recognising the pluriform nature of poverty amidst complex and sometimes hidden circumstances is, for Gutiérrez, a task for liberation theology.

On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation (2004). At the age of 76, Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote an exchange with his former student, Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, who, in 2012, would become Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the same congregation of the Roman Curia that had issued contentious corrections to aspects of liberation theology (1984, 1986)⁷⁰⁷ under then Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI). This exchange between Gutiérrez and Müller was first published in German in 2004 and finally in English in 2015. For our purposes, it provides insight into Gutiérrez’ thinking on poverty toward a latter part of his career and helps to bookend our investigation. In this final work we will see, first, that despite the original concerns of early Latin American liberation theology for those in extreme poverty, Gutiérrez has remained committed to a broadened understanding of poverty which connects to a myriad of liberation movements. This is seen especially as he considers, in this work, an

⁷⁰⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., xxiii.

⁷⁰⁷ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation,’” Vatican Website, 6 Aug 1984, accessed 30 Oct 2021, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation,” Vatican Website, 2 Mar 1986, accessed 30 Oct 2021, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html.

increasingly globalised, interconnected world. Second, we consider the stress Gutiérrez places on the importance for theology to help give meaning to human existence.

In a footnote in chapter 3, titled “The Situation and Tasks of Liberation Theology,” Gutiérrez writes that the fall of the Berlin Wall had little to do with the essential cause of liberation theology. He says, “The historical starting point for this theology was not the situation of the Eastern European countries. It was, and certainly continues to be, the inhuman poverty of Latin America and the interpretation we make of it in the light of faith.”⁷⁰⁸ While this certainly seems the case, it is also clear that Gutiérrez showed an earlier commitment to revolutionary political and socio-economic liberation, one that admitted of potential class conflict and violence. In *The Power of the Poor in History*, he wrote, “Politics today involves confrontation—and varying degrees of violence—among human groups, among social classes with opposing interests. Being an ‘artisan of peace’ not only does not dispense from presence in these conflicts, it demands that one take part in them, in order to pull them up by the roots.”⁷⁰⁹

In *On the Side of the Poor*, Gutiérrez cites two friends, Victor and Irene Chero who, in 1958, said to John Paul II during his visit to Peru that, “‘With our hearts broken by suffering, we see our wives pregnant while ill with tuberculosis, our babies dying, our children growing up weak and without a future....But despite all of this, we believe in the God of life.’”⁷¹⁰ To reconcile terrible circumstances of affliction with a belief in a God who has “loving predilection for the weak and mistreated of human history”⁷¹¹ and seeks ameliorating action in the world, is the task of Gutiérrez’ theology. Liberation theology is marked and haunted by the cries of the brutally poor. It is a commitment to those suffering

⁷⁰⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Situation and Tasks of Liberation Theology Today,” in *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation*, trans. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 33.

⁷⁰⁹ Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 48.

⁷¹⁰ Gutiérrez, “Situation and Tasks of Liberation Theology,” 52.

⁷¹¹ Gutiérrez, “Where Will the Poor Sleep?,” 90.

what the CELAM conference in Domingo called ““intolerable extremes of misery””⁷¹² alongside a belief in “God’s love for every person and particularly for those who are most abandoned.”⁷¹³

Gutiérrez, in *On the Side of the Poor*, seeks to demonstrate how his original conceptions of poverty, whilst placing an important emphasis on economic conditions, were never intended to be limited to those. He, again, confirms the earlier suggestions of this paper, that his emphasis on the “nonperson” was to broaden the scope and affirm the multidimensionality of poverty. He further explains that the nonperson is “someone whose full rights as a human being are not recognized. We are talking about persons without social individual weight, who count little in society or in the church. This is how they are seen or, more precisely, not seen, because they are in fact invisible insofar they are excluded in today’s world.”⁷¹⁴ Further, he says the poor can also be viewed as “the others of a society constructed without regard for, or even over against, their most basic rights.”⁷¹⁵ Perhaps he puts it most concisely when he again equates poverty with forms of death, saying, “In the final analysis, poverty...means death. It is physical death for many persons and cultural death due to contempt for so many others.”⁷¹⁶ Liberation theology, for Gutiérrez, works toward the recognition and reconstitution of those that are being made (or already are) invisible. It is also a theological movement which anticipates the poor standing up and playing a vital role in the liberation of all persons.

Gutiérrez acknowledges the role globalisation and technology plays against simplistic understandings of poverty/oppression. He writes,

We will have to avoid the temptation of pigeonholing by assigning these challenges to the different continents: the challenge of modernity to the

⁷¹² Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Theology: An Ecclesial Function,” in *On the Side of the Poor: The Theology of Liberation*, trans. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 4.

⁷¹³ Gutiérrez, “Situation and Tasks of Liberation Theology,” 41-42.

⁷¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷¹⁶ Gutiérrez, “Where Will the Poor Sleep?,” 129.

Western world, that of poverty to Latin America and Africa, and that of religious pluralism to Asia. This would be a simplistic solution that overlooks the interactions and points of contact among different peoples and cultures today. It also ignores the speed of communications, which we are witnessing and which gives rise to a sense of closeness felt by people who are geographically far apart.⁷¹⁷

Here he is arguing the need to avoid clean divisions or polarities that ignore a myriad of complex contemporary factors. This seems to reflect an openness to move beyond lower-resolution analysis in order to “have a great capacity for listening and for being open to what the Lord can say to us from other human, cultural, and religious perspectives.”⁷¹⁸

While Gutiérrez is appreciative of an interconnected world, he also does not refrain from condemning those most responsible for global inequality and injustice outside the centres of affluence. He says, “What we have is a more and more pronounced asymmetry. Millions of people are converted in this way into useless objects or into disposable objects that are thrown away after use. We are talking about those who remain outside the sphere of knowledge, the decisive element in the economy of our time and the most important axis of capital accumulation.”⁷¹⁹ Also, “This dehumanization of the economy...tends to convert everything, including persons, into merchandise.”⁷²⁰ So then, amidst a complex interconnected world, with a myriad of countervailing forces, and ongoing dehumanisation, how does Gutiérrez suggest we should order or prioritise our attention?

This is where, once again, a preferential option for the poor is critical. He says,

The fundamental contribution of liberation theology, it seems to me, revolves around what is called ‘the preferential option for the poor.’ This option shapes, deepens, and in the end corrects many commitments made during the years as well as the theological reflections linked to them. The option for the poor is radically rooted in the gospel and thus constitutes an important guideline for sifting through the fast-paced events and the intellectual currents of our days.⁷²¹

⁷¹⁷ Gutiérrez, “Situation and Tasks of Liberation Theology,” 53.

⁷¹⁸ Gutiérrez, “Where Will the Poor Sleep?,” 124.

⁷¹⁹ Gutiérrez, “Situation and Tasks of Liberation Theology,” 48.

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷²¹ Gutiérrez, “Where Will the Poor Sleep?,” 88.

Gutiérrez is disturbed “by the growing distance...between the nations of the world and between persons within each country.”⁷²² And for this reason, global liberationist movements should carry on.

A second important, and perhaps overlooked, contribution in *On the Side of the Poor* is Gutiérrez’ emphasis on theology’s necessary role in helping provide meaning to human existence. On one level, this may not seem novel, as Gutiérrez is constantly affirming human dignity, particularly for those forgotten and oppressed. But Gutiérrez is speaking of a larger loss of purpose which helps give life meaning. Consider this lengthy citation at the conclusion to the book:

The present moment makes us see the urgency of something that might seem very elementary: giving meaning to human existence. Various factors mentioned in these pages come together to weaken or disperse reference points and make it hard for people today, perhaps especially young people, to see the why and the wherefore of their lives. Without this, among other things, the struggle for a more just social order and human solidarity loses steam and has no bite.

A key task in the proclamation of the gospel today is to contribute to giving life meaning. Perhaps in the early stages of theological work in Latin America, we took it for granted...Whatever the case, it is certain that at present we must worry about the very foundations of the human condition and of the life of faith.

Once again, it seems to me that the commitment to the poor, as a choice centered on the gratuitous love of God, has an important word to say in this matter...repeating what the gospel says with complete simplicity: love for God and love for neighbour sum up the message of Jesus.

This is what really matters.⁷²³

Here, it seems, is a fitting place to conclude this investigation into Gutiérrez’ view of poverty. This final passage, I believe, illustrates what is beneath all of Gutiérrez’ work, that is a relentless desire to underwrite the intrinsic value of all human beings, not over and against other living beings, but as members of a created order built for community. That a

⁷²² Gutiérrez, “Situation and Tasks of Liberation Theology,” 42.

⁷²³ Gutiérrez, “Where Will the Poor Sleep?,” 132-33.

loss of “the why and wherefore of [our] lives” may erode the very movements of solidarity Gutiérrez has committed his life to, is a very serious concern for him.

Summary

My investigation has sought to understand the sometimes ambiguous and equivocal nature of poverty for Gutiérrez. Gutiérrez has provided an important definition for biblical poverty in three core categories: material, spiritual and poverty as commitment in solidarity. Descriptions of material poverty, we have noticed, can be grouped into four subcategories: unnecessary misery today, deprivation from certain enrichment, the predatory abuse and/or neglect of persons, and the spoiling of a greater society. The preferential option for the poor, whilst interrelated with a variety of conditions of impoverishment and oppression, will always be centred, for him, in material poverty. This was maintained, in 2007, when he has said, “I want to be clear that when I speak about poverty and the poor, I am not thinking only of the economic level. Certainly, again, *this aspect is most important* [emphasis added], but still, it is only one aspect.”⁷²⁴ Through his discussions on the “right of the poor to think,” “nonpersons,” and “the absent” we see Gutiérrez connecting material poverty to a larger set of existing liberationist movements. These terms, I have said, describe an active *ghosting process* of the living. It is not simply a material lack, but a thinning or deprivation of one’s presence.

Gutiérrez is not interested to crystallize existing understandings or forms of oppression. Instead, he is concerned to also pay attention to surreptitious and emerging forms which prompt new and challenging questions for the Christian faith. He said, “From pastoral questions, from practical questions, we get new theologies.”⁷²⁵ With new questions, he has also welcomed new tools of analysis that may consider the manifold

⁷²⁴ Gutiérrez, “Liberation Theology for the Twenty-First Century,” 47.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

causes for suffering and injustice. While I will not attempt to build on Gutiérrez' definition of poverty until the following chapter, it is possible to now say that, especially in discussions of the right to think, nonpersons and the absent, there is a noticeable connection between Gutiérrez and the concerns of this project for attention colonisation. Gutiérrez' interest in novel forms of poverty and new forms of analysis which may help illuminate and remediate against them also indicates, at the very least, further provisional points of contact. It is also clear that, despite the broadening of the meanings of poverty, the preferential option for the poor, for Gutiérrez, remains foremost for those in material or physical destitution. This will, again, be addressed at length in Chapter 7.

We will now turn to briefly mark the outlines of Albert Borgmann's notion of "advanced poverty." Borgmann, in effect, challenges Gutiérrez' definitions of poverty, both as understood in the Gospels, and for use today. This will impact the final understanding of poverty this project constructs in the following chapter.

II. Borgmann's Advanced Poverty

According to Albert Borgmann, there is a unified depth between biblical poverty (both what Gutiérrez calls material and spiritual poverty) and biblical liberation. In the Gospels, the poor "cannot through a sheer act of the will, through an effort that would owe nothing to anyone, secure their welfare."⁷²⁶ The poor are open to salvific wholeness which is both the healing of physiological needs *and* that "their sins are forgiven; they are freed of hostility and despair, i.e., of their helpless efforts to master their deficiency."⁷²⁷ This wholeness is manifested in "the spirit of affection and generosity from which the salvation issued to begin with,"⁷²⁸ and engages the liberated person in celebrations of "gratitude and sharing, in the gladly accepted dependence on others, and in the willingness to have others

⁷²⁶ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 103.

⁷²⁷ Ibid.

⁷²⁸ Ibid.

take part in one's gifts."⁷²⁹ The rich, on the other hand, do not engage in this fullness of life because they "possess and control the conditions of their wholeness"⁷³⁰ which inevitably precludes wholeness which is in helping and being helped amid one's own frailty.

Importantly, Borgmann does not believe that biblical poverty has retained its meaning and depth today. He argues that biblical poverty and biblical liberation have been separated by means of modern science and technology.⁷³¹ In the places where, in large part, poverty has been eliminated, it was not generated from a spirit of generosity and gratitude, but in the construction of complex economic machineries. And the misery that remains in developing countries could be fully addressed by extension of technological machineries with little or no adverse effect on the affluent. But this has not been done and therefore "global misery is no longer an essential sign of human frailty but a scandal."⁷³² He writes, "global poverty has attained, necessarily, I believe, a bitterness and brutality that make such poverty a difficult and contradictory setting for the promise of salvation."⁷³³ Our transition from a pre-modern/biblical setting to one indelibly shaped by technology, requires, for Borgmann, a new conception of poverty, one fit for purpose.

Borgmann believes biblical poverty has been split into two conditions: *brute poverty* and *advanced poverty*. *Brute poverty* is the cruel and unnecessary condition of material deprivation and physical suffering that exists despite, as was pointed out, the technological means to address it.⁷³⁴ *Advanced poverty*, on the other hand, is a concealed form of "impoverishment of life in the most advanced technological setting."⁷³⁵ He

⁷²⁹ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 103.

⁷³⁰ Ibid.

⁷³¹ Ibid.

⁷³² Ibid., 104.

⁷³³ Ibid.

⁷³⁴ Ibid.

⁷³⁵ Ibid., 106.

utilises here Harvey Cox's discussion, in the *Secular City*, of the contemporary Big Airport where "troubling features are fused with an appearance of a sleek brilliance and pleasant affluence. This gleaming comfort is at the same time barren and shallow; there is a lack of untamed life and intimacy with living things."⁷³⁶ Amidst this "peculiar vacuity and superficiality of modern life"⁷³⁷ a troubling feature emerges as it relates to the brutally poor, which is the "unquestionable comfort and security that has all but paralyzed our capacity to help and to be helped and so to have part in the fullness of life."⁷³⁸ To summarise then, advanced poverty is a form of destitution whereby as masters of historic human liberation (over and against hunger, disease, etc.) and enrichment (toward learning, leisure, etc.), we nevertheless endure surreptitious forms of captivity and deprivation which have atomised and superficialised persons within a "cocoon of autonomy."⁷³⁹ For Borgmann, this situation in advanced poverty is grave. He writes, "A life without grace and gratitude is unChristian, not in this failing or that, but from the ground up. It has become incapable of redemption."⁷⁴⁰ This is then, for Borgmann, the essential problem for Christianity today.

But what of the relationship between brute and advanced poverty? Is brute poverty the result of oppression by those in advanced poverty? Borgmann would agree it is. But, he argues, to keep poverty in a framework of rights is "to move poverty into a quasi-legal framework" and "is not to confront [the powerful] fully in a religious sense."⁷⁴¹ Also, for Borgmann, there is the concern that brute poverty, despite always having first claim on our practical efforts, is nevertheless, "so brutal and senseless, its elimination will not be the

⁷³⁶ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 106.

⁷³⁷ Ibid.

⁷³⁸ Ibid.

⁷³⁹ Ibid., 115.

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., 105.

occasion for the rise and celebration of a joyful sense of wholeness.”⁷⁴² Furthermore, he sees, in the culture of technology, that the normal successor of brute poverty is advanced poverty. Therefore, he concludes here, “the religious inconclusiveness of brute poverty and its normal supersession by advanced poverty suggest that if there is today a decisive setting for the advent of the Gospel’s good news, it must be advanced poverty. And second, if there is to be any hope for a vigorous and imminent attack on brute poverty, it hinges on our ability to open up in advanced poverty a sense of compassion and a readiness to share.”⁷⁴³ This “sense of compassion and a readiness to share” is quite different from an advanced technocratic mindset that would apply itself to conditions of brute poverty in a continuing belief that “we can secure for ourselves and possess unconditionally valid assurances regarding our basic condition.”⁷⁴⁴ Then, for Borgmann, what are possible options to address the isolated, anesthetised persons within the device paradigm, and the resulting cruelty for those suffering poor outside its borders?

One unhelpful option is that further activities and companionship end up “in the service of more consumption, of reviving its charms, and of deepening its hold on us.”⁷⁴⁵ While not specifically cited, one can recognise the marketing of robotic companionship along these lines. The promise of disburdening the pain and suffering of loneliness creates yet another market commodity, which could be seen as another application of the device paradigm intent on conquering and controlling reality.⁷⁴⁶ The other option, for Borgmann, is to make room for grace and sacraments that have often been displaced by commodities. For Borgmann grace is the presence of God “always undeserved and often unforethinkable”⁷⁴⁷ and relies on what is beyond prediction and control. The ability to

⁷⁴² Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 105.

⁷⁴³ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid., 115.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid., 126.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid., 65.

love and be loved in return (including toward and from the brutally poor) is to open spaces for those things that “occupy a place and take their time,”⁷⁴⁸ of a “demanding and commanding thing”⁷⁴⁹ that speaks in its own right. Borgmann sees this manifested, as we have earlier discussed, in “focal things and practices,”⁷⁵⁰ and in particular in communal celebrations (e.g., in liturgy or in the preparation and enjoyment of a meal with others) where both skilful discipline and an opportunity for grace are present. The hope Borgmann sees for Christianity in a culture of technology is, despite restless attempts to control and conquer reality, and in an ever-expanding world of commodification, that openings can be established and maintained outside the dominant paradigm for the skilful and meaningful encounter of the other. Here, Borgmann imagines real evangelical solidarity with the brutally suffering poor—also, it would seem, a suffering planet.

Conclusion

While Borgmann’s idea of advanced poverty emphasises the harms of “cocoon of autonomy,” he does not provide examples, in any material sense, of the captivity and deprivation. However, I determined in Chapter 2 that, in attention colonisation, captivity and deprivation was both credible and recognisable. We now have a detailed account of Gutiérrez’ view of poverty and the outline of Borgmann’s advanced poverty supported by attention colonisation. It is critical in Chapter 7 to perform a comparative analysis of Gutiérrez and Borgmann’s views of poverty. Both Borgmann and Gutiérrez are concerned with the condition of the poor. Both believe there is primacy for those in brutal or material poverty. Both see a need for giving meaning to human life today. Gutiérrez sees this animated, at least in substantial part, through a direct commitment and encounter, in love, with the poor. Borgmann, while not disagreeing, sees a peculiar problem, which is that

⁷⁴⁸ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 77.

⁷⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

liberation via technological achievement has altered the landscape such that that the Gospel's good news is muted or dimmed of its revelatory and alleviatory power. Here, Waters will summarise Borgmann's project this way: "When technology is separated from any larger moral purpose, then the resulting device paradigm promotes a vacuous culture of rabid consumers who, in response to the very vacuity of their circumstances, perpetuate a society of indifferent and sullen incivility."⁷⁵¹ Borgmann believes this has consequences for Christian solidarity. We will explore in the following chapter how, in light of both thinkers, we can understand poverty in the age of technology, and whether forms of voluntary poverty could play an important role in remediating indifference and distraction in an expanding culture of technology.

⁷⁵¹ Brent Waters, *Christian Moral Theology in the Emerging Technoculture: from Posthuman Back to Human* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2014), 106, ProQuest Ebook Central.

Chapter 7

Poverty in an Age of Technology

This chapter will unfold in two sections. In section one, I will compare and contrast Gutiérrez and Borgmann on the meanings of poverty today. We will begin by considering their locations, areas of important agreement for my project and key areas of difference. To help facilitate this comparative analysis, I will work through, in more detail, Borgmann's discussion of brute/advanced poverty and juxtapose his key conclusions with the arguments of Gutiérrez. The result, in section one, is what will appear to be a fundamental incongruity in their visions of poverty. However, in section two, I engage critically with the views of both scholars and I will posit what I believe is a key for understanding the relationship between their views. In light of this key, I will conclude section two by critiquing both scholars' arguments. This will include what I call the *problem of the first step*. Section two will prepare my argument for this chapter's principal contribution. In the conclusion, I frame the earliest outlines of a conceptual device (which I call *metapoverty*) to help comprehend both the larger harmony and necessary tensions between Gutiérrez and Borgmann's essential viewpoints. What will remain is a view of poverty whereby the excesses and limitations of Gutiérrez and Borgmann are subsumed or corrected by the other in very important ways.

What I have already indicated here might suggest that my view of poverty is comprehensive, and it is true, I am attempting to inform a particular form of suffering (i.e., attention colonisation) within a much larger set of conditions (i.e., a culture of technology). And when we address this larger set of conditions with perspectives from, in this case, Gutiérrez in Latin American liberation theology, this view becomes decidedly more global in scope. But from the beginning, this project is a theology which begins with those suffering in my location. In the end, I will argue that metapoverty, in a time of attention

colonisation, must be addressed from its local point of entry. This entry point, as we will see, is through the recognition of poverty as a fundamental condition in advanced technological societies and its redress is through actions and practices of obfuscation, circumscription and ‘re-gravitation.’ Let us now turn to section one, where we will work to make these landing points for Chapter 7 more clear and possible.

I. Gutiérrez and Borgmann in Dialogue

Distinct Locations

In order to compare the perspectives of Gutiérrez and Borgmann on poverty, and to indicate the force and direction of their positions within metapoverty, it is necessary to briefly put forward the distinct locations from and for which they are writing. Gutiérrez, for his part, was influenced by tensions between the optimistic promises of the Enlightenment/modernity (e.g., for enrichment, disburdenment and self-determination) and an unjust lack of extension, for such a modernist vision, to the poor in his midst.⁷⁵² *The larger modernisation project is not so much questioned by Gutiérrez, more so the cruelty and injustice for those yet excluded from its promise.* The assertion of agency, controlling one’s own destiny and the poor’s “progressive integration”⁷⁵³ into a history of advancement are prominent concerns for Gutiérrez.⁷⁵⁴

This concern for the poor’s integration into the march of history is reflected in Gutiérrez’ theology.⁷⁵⁵ The central place of the poor in salvation history reminds the poor of God’s love and of their place in historical praxis, and is a prophetic denunciation against

⁷⁵² Gaspar Martínez. *Confronting the Mystery of God Political, Liberation, and Public Theologies* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 106, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁷⁵⁴ Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 29.

⁷⁵⁵ In Gutiérrez’ earliest writings are clearly informed by radical political action and socio-economic analysis, influenced by Marx and others. Later, Gutiérrez seems to have questioned his theology being at the very nexus of a certain politic, and instead favors a view of liberation theology as being essentially the preferential option for the poor, theological method and a concern for evangelisation. Gutiérrez, “Option for the Poor,” 235.

those (European/North American) Christians that would forget, ignore or bypass God's preferential option for the poor in their own, often dominant, theologies. While Gutiérrez can be seen as clearly facing toward the poor in his work, that is, identifying Christian meaning in the very midst of suffering and toward liberation beyond it, he is also facing, simultaneously, towards the dominant theologies which he wants to confront with the cries of the poor. As Gaspar says, "Latin American spirituality and theology are both a contribution and a challenge to the spirituality and theology of First World countries."⁷⁵⁶

Borgmann, on the other hand, is not beginning with the conditions of material poverty which inform Gutiérrez. Nor is he beginning with oppression as a normative condition in his analysis. Rather, he is starting with the affluent (in relative terms) citizens in advanced technological societies, which he believes is the "social center of gravity and responsibility."⁷⁵⁷ Ultimately, he is concerned with understanding and then developing concrete ways of being in a technological society. While Borgmann is not writing to those outside the present boundaries of a technological society, he is concerned with the way in which the shape of our technological life directly impacts those persons, that is, how the promise of technology bears both liberative and, simultaneously, harms for persons inside and outside its borders.

Both Gutiérrez and Borgmann are starting in stridently distinct places and the relationship between these two worlds is also understood in fundamentally different ways. Before unpacking this further, let us first acknowledge the important ways in which Gutiérrez and Borgmann quite helpfully agree.

⁷⁵⁶ Martínez, *Confronting the Mystery*, 140.

⁷⁵⁷ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 85.

Areas of Important Agreement

First, both Gutiérrez and Borgmann recognise the centrality and primacy of the poor, both as expressed in the salvific plan of God and in its priority of all Christians. Gutiérrez can make this no clearer than in *the preferential option for the poor*. He says that God loves everyone but “God clearly prefers the least, the abandoned, the insignificant person.”⁷⁵⁸ Goizueta underscores how critical this insight is for Gutiérrez and the church in the last third of the twentieth century, when he says, “the theological insight that has arguably had the greatest impact on the life of the church is the notion that the God of Jesus Christ is revealed in a privileged, preferential way among the poor and marginalized peoples of our world.”⁷⁵⁹ Borgmann concurs with this, saying, “In the Gospels, salvation is a promise that is first and most of all extended to the poor. With this I agree.”⁷⁶⁰ In terms of Christian practice, Borgmann also agrees that material (or what he calls brutal) poverty should have “first claim on our practical efforts.”⁷⁶¹

Second, and moreover, both Gutiérrez and Borgmann are clear that the treatment of the materially poor today is a *scandal* and their condition should not be somehow sacralised by always conjoining such a shameful condition with positive notions of a spiritual poverty (or childlike surrender to the will or purposes of God). As we explored in Chapter 6, this is precisely Gutiérrez’ point in differentiating between the meanings of material and spiritual poverty and referring to material poverty as always being akin to death.⁷⁶² And Gutiérrez is unequivocal that, “In the Bible poverty is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God.”⁷⁶³ As we have seen, Gutiérrez sees the biblical meanings of poverty as normative for understanding

⁷⁵⁸ Gutiérrez, “Liberation Theology for the Twenty-First Century,” 51.

⁷⁵⁹ Goizueta, “Liberation Theology I,” 290.

⁷⁶⁰ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 103.

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷⁶² Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., xxi.

⁷⁶³ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 291.

poverty today. Borgmann, on the other hand, recognises “brute poverty in its scandalous starkness” because today it is “a cruel and unnecessary misfortune since the elimination of that misery is clearly possible, not only conceptually but in fact.”⁷⁶⁴

Third, opposite such conditions, both authors see the problem of the affluent being hidden away from the cries of those in physical suffering and material deprivation. Both acknowledge some degree of this being informed by a larger technological culture. While Gutiérrez is considerably less acute in his grasp of this, he will say, “The future looks as if it will be fascinating for those who have a certain social standing and who take part in cutting-edge technological knowledge. Those who have this chance tend to form an international human stratum closed in on itself, forgetting about those who are not part of their club, including some in their own countries.”⁷⁶⁵ We will explore more on Borgmann’s view on the sequestering of persons away from meaningful encounter with the poor (which he sees as a kind of impoverishment) shortly.

Fourth, both are troubled with a culture (technological, or otherwise) that dehumanises persons. For Borgmann, this can be seen, from Chapter 3, in a rampant device paradigm, which, for him, includes even the commodification of persons. For Gutiérrez, this was similarly exemplified when he discussed how persons today are being turned into merchandise.⁷⁶⁶ Toward the inverse, both are also concerned, as we have seen, with the reception of the good news. They both affirm salvation/liberation sourced from the gift of God’s grace and gratuitous love and, as I have just indicated in the last chapter in Gutiérrez, opportunities for meaning/mattering that issue from it. There is here an inseparable intertwining of encounter(s) of good news, a reception of meaning for one’s existence and forms of proclamation which generate less from a mandate and more from a

⁷⁶⁴ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 104.

⁷⁶⁵ Gutiérrez, “Where Will the Poor Sleep?,” 93.

⁷⁶⁶ Gutiérrez, “Situation and Tasks of Liberation Theology Today,” 49.

contagion of joy, indeed of received relief. This is joy which also compounds as it circulates through encounter with others—and for Gutiérrez, especially the poor. While Gutiérrez will always denunciate the scandal of poverty, we can see through the spiritual/contemplative evolution in his thought an emphasis on a dynamic of joy for all who receive and share God’s love.⁷⁶⁷ *This is the commitment to encounter which may be simultaneously vitalising and burdensome.* Borgmann echoes this from his view of focal concerns and how the attendance to such matters of significance (persons or otherwise) are crucial in a technological age concerned to excise noise and burden. As we have seen, for Borgmann, that humans carry a capacity to embody, comprehend, mediate, and make significance prevail is always and already conditioned from within a relational context. This relational context, inherent with burdens, exists with an attendant concern, or perhaps a better word is *ache*, for the vulnerability of others which is also our own.

Fifth and finally, in terms of important areas of agreement, we have seen Gutiérrez and Borgmann concur on the complex and potentially surreptitious nature of poverty. Gutiérrez made clear, in his discussions of the ‘right to think,’ the ‘absent,’ and especially the ‘nonperson,’ that *poverty is multivarious and can yet exist in forms of alienation, enslavement, and oppression beyond conditions of clear physical suffering and material lack.* (This was very helpful for understanding my project’s relationship to Gutiérrez’ liberation theology.) Gutiérrez warned against canonising certain tools of analysis, but given poverty and oppression’s existence in the hidden or quotidian aspects of people’s lives, that there should be an openness to what other disciplines, tools, and contextual theologies can help uncover. Borgmann could not disagree, given his argument that the way our lives are shaped by a culture of technology largely goes beyond our own awareness. ‘Advanced poverty’ is a specific condition which he has characterised as

⁷⁶⁷ Gutiérrez, “Liberation Theology for the Twenty-First Century,” 58.

largely concealed. Borgmann's use of philosophy of technology is itself an attempt to disclose conditions of captivity and deprivation that may often remain altogether too close for recognition.

Exploring Key Differences

Finally, for section one of this chapter, we will investigate the key differences between Gutiérrez and Borgmann, in particular their conceptions of poverty. As a way into this task, we will work through Borgmann's argument as laid out in *Power Failure*. This is aided by having already performed an in-depth analysis of Gutiérrez' position on poverty, and a basic outline of Borgmann's conception of advanced poverty, in Chapter 6. Where helpful and necessary, I will interject Gutiérrez' views and at the conclusion I will summarise the relationship between their views (or lack of).

In the introduction to *Power Failure*, Borgmann lays out the problem: as technology and standards of living rise, there seems to be a connected decline in faith.⁷⁶⁸ Borgmann argues this is because "technology seems to render Christianity superfluous and irrelevant. The good news of the Gospels is directed toward oppressed and poor people, one might think, and when oppression and poverty have been lifted by technology, the good news becomes old."⁷⁶⁹ All is not lost for Christianity, though, in Borgmann's view. Perhaps below the surface of certain liberty and enrichment, there is also "a sense of captivity and deprivation."⁷⁷⁰ Borgmann is interested to see how the good news can reach persons amidst such conditions. Interestingly, Borgmann refers to the underbelly of an age of technology, this captivity and deprivation, as a kind of "subclinical malady."⁷⁷¹ 'Subclinical' as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is, "Of a disease, infection, etc:

⁷⁶⁸ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 7.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁷⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid.*

that does not give rise to symptoms or observable signs.”⁷⁷² One can already see a remarkable tension here with Gutiérrez who, in *On Job*, described his concern for:

the starvation of millions, the humiliation of races regarded as inferior, discrimination against women, especially women who are poor, systemic social injustice, a persistent high rate of infant mortality, those who simply ‘disappear’ or are deprived of their freedom, the sufferings of people who are struggling for their right to live, the exiles and the refugees, terrorism of every kind, and the corpse-filled common graves of Ayacucho.⁷⁷³

Gravity is certainly on the side of the starvation of millions, is it not? To, alternatively, be concerned foremost for a subclinical malady could be understood as making a mockery of conditions of material depravity. But subclinical, whilst not displaying overt severity in symptoms, could also be understood to speak to a kind of diffused condition, or one of thinning and attenuation. Similarly it can speak to the surreptitious nature of an affliction, which we have just said both scholars are in accord in the case of poverty. For Borgmann, the necessity arises, therefore, to have a clear-eyed view of, in this case, the way of life within the techno-culture and its under-disclosed affects for persons.

Borgmann’s idea of (advanced) poverty arises in a discussion of Harvey Cox’s *The Feast of Fools* and in *Religion in the Secular City*. The former, for Borgmann, is “exposing the typical debility of advanced contemporary culture”⁷⁷⁴ and the latter showed an important turn in Cox’s thinking where he adjusts his method toward “a subordination of theory to practice.”⁷⁷⁵ This turn in method narrowed Cox’s focus toward a careful consideration for the ways Christians are struggling to experience the Word of God in his own secular context. Cox argues that poverty is an essential condition for the meaningful reception of the gospel, that salvation is promised first most to the poor. Borgmann summarises Cox: “To become vital again, the church must return to the poor. And it has

⁷⁷² *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “subclinical,” accessed 20 Aug 2022, <https://www-oed-com.manchester.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/290497?redirectedFrom=subclinical#eid>.

⁷⁷³ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 102.

⁷⁷⁴ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 102.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

to be done so most decidedly in the grass-roots communities of Latin America and in the liberation theology that ponders and promotes the work of these communities. Because these currents spring from the vital center of Christianity, Cox concludes, they carry the greatest promise for the revival of Christianity in the secular city.”⁷⁷⁶ Borgmann, as we have seen, agrees with a primacy of the poor, both as a matter of salvation history, and as a matter for all practical efforts in remediating suffering and injustice. It is on Cox’s second point, of the secular city finding its vital centre among the poor in Latin America, for example, that Borgmann will express a grave concern. While Gutiérrez is concerned for the poor being agents of their own destiny and centres his theological inquiry around the question of, “*How do we say to the poor: God loves you?*”,⁷⁷⁷ he is also recognising, amongst the poor, a way for the materially prosperous to (re)source their faith. Gutiérrez says, “The option [for the poor] is also a way of finding Jesus. It is the way to be a disciple.”⁷⁷⁸ So we can see Cox is in a certain amount of agreement, albeit coming from a Northern Hemisphere location. He is responding to the contribution and challenge of Latin American liberation theology, integrating these insights with a concern for forms of debilitation within his own context.

Borgmann’s problem with locating the secular city’s vital centre amongst the poor in Latin America is because, as we discussed, he sees in the Gospels a unity between poverty and liberty that no longer exists in a contemporary age of technology. Human frailty in the Gospels (which would be the whole of what Gutiérrez separates as material and spiritual poverty) is no longer most eloquently expressed among, for example, the hungry and sick.⁷⁷⁹ The affluent simply have the means to perform these tasks, and

⁷⁷⁶ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 103.

⁷⁷⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Saying and Showing to the Poor: ‘God Loves You,’” in *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations between Dr. Paul Farmer and Father Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 27.

⁷⁷⁸ Gutiérrez, “Liberation Theology for the Twenty-First Century,” 57.

⁷⁷⁹ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 104.

liberation from such physical sufferings no longer (in general) is “an occasion for a healing and sharing which the joy and radiance of life come to be celebrated.”⁷⁸⁰ The very reason material poverty is a scandal is because there *are* means to address it, and yet, in so many cases it is not. Moreover, as we heard, Borgmann argues that “poverty seen in the framework of rights is no longer or not yet a final religious issue. The violation of a right must certainly be objectionable from a religious point of view. But to honor a right is a religiously inconclusive act since rights in the modern era are morally minimal though fundamental entitlements.” Therefore, “to demand of others they honor a right and nothing else is not to confront them fully in a religious sense.” Rather, “it moves poverty into a quasi-legal framework and way from the center of religious concern.”⁷⁸¹ By religious sense or concern, he, again, is speaking of a liberation which is born of human frailty, of liberative healing, and “the celebration of life in the spirit of affection and generosity from which the salvation issued to begin with.”⁷⁸² As material poverty (which Borgmann calls brute poverty) is a callous scandal, “it is a difficult and contradictory setting for the promise of salvation.”⁷⁸³ The response among the poor to material liberation is not so often “the rise and celebration of a joyful sense of wholeness,”⁷⁸⁴ but, rather the question, why have you only just arrived? And, for Borgmann, to simply honour human (we might add nonhuman) rights is a “religiously impoverished notion of poverty.”⁷⁸⁵

This brings us to the other condition, advanced poverty, into which Borgmann believes poverty in the Gospels has now been split. From Cox’s work, Borgmann has agreed there is a general impoverishment that is concealed amidst technological advancement. It is amidst a “gleaming comfort” which is “at the same time barren and

⁷⁸⁰ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 104.

⁷⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁷⁸² *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷⁸³ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

shallow; there is a lack of untamed life and intimacy with living things.”⁷⁸⁶ And that this growing general impoverishment is underrecognised amidst “an appearance of sleek brilliance and pleasant affluence.”⁷⁸⁷

How else does he describe this advanced poverty which is the “typical and fundamental poverty in the technological society”?⁷⁸⁸ We have heard it referred to as “a sense of captivity and deprivation.”⁷⁸⁹ And a feature of advanced poverty is “suffering from an incapacity to be moved by misery” and “that it exhibits a profound insensitivity to the misery beyond its boundaries.”⁷⁹⁰ But, *how* does this happen? Borgmann offers, “It is the accomplishment of unquestionable comfort and security that has all but paralyzed our capacity to help and to be helped and so to have part in the fullness of life.”⁷⁹¹ Such a lack of frailty (perceived or otherwise) insulates persons from the impact of the good news. The gospel is depreciated and, therefore, he argues, “Advanced poverty is the pivotal problem of contemporary Christianity.”⁷⁹² Given Borgmann’s typically careful and circumspect prose, this is a striking statement.

With Cox, Borgmann agrees that any hope for good news in our age of technology, is to *reclaim poverty as a fundamental human condition*.⁷⁹³ As brute poverty is religiously inconclusive⁷⁹⁴ and also, since an extension of the technical and economic machineries to the brutally poor risks extending advanced poverty (the incapacity to help and be helped) to those remaining in brute poverty, Borgmann believes that “if there is today a decisive setting for the advent of the Gospel’s good news, it must be advanced poverty.”⁷⁹⁵

⁷⁸⁶ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 106.

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid., 104.

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid., 105.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid., 106.

⁷⁹² Ibid., 104.

⁷⁹³ Ibid., 107.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid., 105.

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid.

Moreover, to reclaim poverty (i.e., human frailty) as a fundamental human condition is to locate it in the “typical circumstances of ordinary life.”⁷⁹⁶ This is consistent with Borgmann’s work as a philosopher of technology, where he understands philosophical to mean “*reflective and reasoned.*” While appreciating Cox’s (and we could add liberation theology’s) emphasis on praxis, Borgmann will argue for careful thinking about the concrete circumstances which give rise to advanced poverty. He says, “Reason and reflection cannot presume to govern faith, but they can precede it and clear space for it. Making room for Christianity is in fact the most promising response to technology.”⁷⁹⁷ Borgmann invites others to join in this theological task and admits of the limited nature of his contribution.

More than simply realising the conditions which make persons insensitive to the misery of others (e.g., the device paradigm), Borgmann seeks what will also, in fact, prompt reform. Recall, in Chapter 3, when we discussed reform is not, for him, the creation of new products and services (we might add, technocratic programmes), which reinstitute the position of the consumer and reinforce the paradigm’s own a priori values and goals. Instead Borgmann has asserted that reform is simply “*the recognition and the restraint* of the paradigm.”⁷⁹⁸ Restraining technology to a supportive or background role gives space for deeper engagement with places, people, and things (i.e., focal concerns or practices) which speak significance and orientation into our lives, away from the predilections of consumerism and disengagement. It also inevitably allows the recontextualising or reconstituting⁷⁹⁹ of those things which have been shorn of their context, discarded, ignored and/or forgotten in the device paradigm. Borgmann seeks an

⁷⁹⁶ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 107.

⁷⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁹⁸ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 220.

⁷⁹⁹ By reconstituting, I mean toward a presence of some consequence and one whereby the significance and relationality of the person or thing is not superficialised to the point of caricature or a kind of ghosting.

opening of interstices, of manoeuvrability, within the technosystem, so to speak. This is the space and ability to engage with what he has called the rightful sacredness (that which mandates respect) and the graceful sacredness (that which commands devotion) of things and persons. This is a multi-directional process of relationality, of both receiving and articulating the significance of the other.

In addition to the realisation and restraint which will make space for reconstituting the significance of the other (and therein our own significance), Borgmann concludes this critical section in *Power Failure* by asking, “What does it take to shake us out of our normalcy and complacency? Catastrophic events? Heroic acts of courage?”⁸⁰⁰

Borgmann will go on in subsequent chapters to discuss the role of courage and fortitude, and practices of a culture of the word and culture of the table (which is familiar from our review of focal concerns). Without taking up these topics directly, it can be said here that Borgmann is seeking to prepare and galvanise persons to meet the challenges for small and ultimately consequential shifts from the existing device paradigm.

I want to pause here to note that Borgmann has utilised, in more than one place, the metaphor of the cocoon. For my project we need to emphasise a different aspect of this metaphor. We have heard of, for example, “a cocoon of troubled comfort”⁸⁰¹ and a “cocoon of autonomy.”⁸⁰² Here the cocoon is an enveloping that keeps one comfortable and removed. To work with his metaphor, I believe that the virtues of courage and fortitude, he here cites, would be analogous to the process of a butterfly developing strength such that it is enabled to positively push through and emerge from its chrysalis or self-enclosure. This would be consistent from what we know from entomologists—

⁸⁰⁰ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 108.

⁸⁰¹ Borgmann, “Setting of the Scene,” 194.

⁸⁰² Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 115.

hormones both soften the chrysalis and prompt the development of the butterfly.⁸⁰³ Once the chrysalis is transparent, the butterfly will push through first with its legs, having hung upside down to slowly expand and dry its wings. Meconium, with the help of gravity, will help harden the wings and give them structure. But working with the metaphor, the cocoon is not, in the case of the butterfly, simply a sequestered state. The caterpillar, after entering the chrysalis, effectively *digests itself by way of enzymes*, with only certain essential cells remaining. This is, for my project, a more interesting and theologically fruitful aspect of life in chrysalis. The enzymes which dissolve the tissues, and hormones which thin the chrysalis, are indicative of an *active* process of degeneration or unwinding. Gravity itself becomes an active force. This is not to suggest that Borgmann is simply putting too much agency upon the enveloped techno-person. It is to furthermore note that negative states are also active in the process of radical transformation. We will return to this line of thinking in section two of this chapter.

For Gutiérrez, he will agree that there is a role for the affluent to move out of their own existence and into the world of the poor. He would also understand this as an active and genuine compassion, a joyful expression of sharing that is born of gratitude. This is most clearly expressed when he speaks of the third meaning of poverty: poverty as commitment in solidarity with the poor and in protest against poverty. The main difference here is that Gutiérrez is describing this poverty positively through action, while Borgmann is describing advanced poverty as the lack of such an action which is the result of the “belief that we can secure for ourselves and possess unconditionally valid assurances regarding our basic condition.”⁸⁰⁴

⁸⁰³ Ferris Jabr, “How Does a Caterpillar Turn into a Butterfly,” *Scientific American*, 10 Aug 2012, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/caterpillar-butterfly-metamorphosis-explainer/#>.

⁸⁰⁴ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 107.

The Fundamental Incongruity of Gutiérrez and Borgmann on Poverty

Attempting to neatly reconcile Gutiérrez and Borgmann on poverty is difficult. Certain aspects of their understandings have a certain overlap (e.g., material and brute poverty). But Borgmann's contention that poverty in the Gospels has a unified depth (between what would be Gutiérrez' material and spiritual poverty) and that this is not a meaningful fulcrum of liberation in the contemporary world, appears to make their views incompatible. Furthermore, there is a fundamental difference in where and how to initiate change. Early Gutiérrez, in *The Power of the Poor in History*, suggested that "only from beyond the frontiers of this modern bourgeois world will it be possible to respond to the challenges of that world."⁸⁰⁵ Borgmann, as we have seen, sees a culture of technology as the central location for any undoing of the scandal of brute poverty. In some ways, Borgmann and Gutiérrez are both aware of the same deep inequalities between the Southern and Northern Hemispheres, but are arguing that initiation for liberation/salvation is arising or should arise from their own locations.

II. A Key and Critique

A Key for Relating Gutiérrez and Borgmann

What if we agreed, with Borgmann and Feenberg, that the device paradigm and technosystem (respectively) together point up technology as a most decisive factor in the circumstances of contemporary life? This is close to Borgmann's central thesis when he says, "The modern world and contemporary life particularly...have been shaped by technology, which has stamped them with a peculiar pattern and so given them their character."⁸⁰⁶ And Feenberg, whilst admitting of a wider range of reform opportunities

⁸⁰⁵ Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 232.

⁸⁰⁶ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 1.

within the technological apparatus, agrees to the subsuming and irrevocable nature of technology. As he said, “Modern society is so completely technified that a return to ‘nature’ is inconceivable.”⁸⁰⁷ In taking up this viewpoint, I believe it is possible to better relate the perspectives of Gutiérrez and Borgmann on poverty.

I have already pointed out that Gutiérrez almost entirely omits, in his analysis, any larger conception for how systems or a culture of technology actually affect or perpetuate conditions of poverty. Gutiérrez believed, as influenced by Descartes, Hegel and Marx, in an ascendent and powerful emancipatory project for humanity,⁸⁰⁸ made possible by the tremendous developments of science and technology. Gutiérrez was distressed that the promises of the Enlightenment/modernity were not being extended to those materially poor in his context. He was concerned to see those suffering and oppressed realise and actualise their place in history—that is, of progressive integration. Here science and technology are often possessed and administered by those unwilling to share, but the question of how technological systems operate *and how this way of life is perpetuated in techno-capitalism* and impacts those outside its borders, is left unanswered. The result is that this way of life (one bound to the technological paradigm), one which Gutiérrez would most certainly denunciate on its face, is, I believe, actually smuggled in with his conception of progress and therefore the lives of those oppressed in his context. That is, the role of technology and the technological way of life, within the march of progress and liberation, is not sufficiently clarified or realised in his thinking.

Gutiérrez argued against the importation of certain Euro-centric and Scholastic theologies which could be used for the justification of oppression. As we have said, of particular note is Gutiérrez’ concern that sacralising spiritual poverty (i.e., childlike

⁸⁰⁷ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 160.

⁸⁰⁸ Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery*, 119.

openness) may promote relinquishment of responsibility toward those in the misery and injustice of material poverty. That is, the blurring of material and spiritual poverty could impede urgent attention to those suffering now. I would not question his arguments here but argue, in light of Gutiérrez' techno-capitalistic blind spot, *he is reading back onto the biblical accounts contemporary expectations of technological liberation today*. That is, he cleaves material and spiritual poverty precisely for the reasons that Borgmann suggests—biblical poverty is today unnecessary and therefore a unified depth between material and spiritual poverty would also therefore be a scandal and a contradictory setting for the advent of the good news. As Gutiérrez saw the poor demanding their integration into a positive, historical and powerful emancipatory project for humanity, and the economic and technological apparatus have made the existence of material poverty *only a scandal*, he appears to be absolutising today's reality back onto his understanding of biblical poverty. The key, therefore, to understanding the relationship between Gutiérrez and Borgmann on poverty is via technology. Technology, when more properly accounted for and acknowledged, places both scholars in considerably more accord, albeit from distinct locations.

I will use this key, between Gutiérrez and Borgmann, to suggest a larger conceptual device (which I call metapoverty) at the conclusion of this chapter. Prior to doing so, I want to briefly critique both scholar's arguments on poverty, excising or moderating aspects of their arguments where it is helpful to do so. This will allow a leaner view of poverty that is salient in the context of attention colonisation. The goal, in the end, is to show how important aspects of their arguments, together and in tension, provide a larger conception of poverty which would not be ultimately useful without certain perspectives of the other.

Critiquing Borgmann and Gutiérrez

I will begin with Borgmann, for which there are three criticisms. First, it is not entirely clear why Borgmann has not simply called those in a condition of advanced poverty today, ‘the rich.’ He certainly has biblical accounts of the rich in mind when he describes advanced poverty.⁸⁰⁹ He says, “Advanced poverty, one might say, is a radically aggravated and universalized form of the condition of the rich of which the Bible speaks.”⁸¹⁰ The rich in the Gospels fail to recognise their own frailty as “they are favored with food and physical health and seem to possess and control the conditions of their wholeness.”⁸¹¹ Borgmann is arguing that an exceptional state of affluence in the pre-modern times is made normative today (far exceeding it, actually, in terms of lifespan, wellbeing, and disburdenment). He has argued why poverty/suffering in this state carries consequences, also its effects for brute poverty and for any hope of recovering the good news amidst a self-empowered techno-culture. But, turning this around, does this mean the rich, in the Gospels, actually suffered a less aggravated and more particularised form of “poverty” in the Gospels? Such a line of enquiry could lead readers of Borgmann to believe he is advocating today a kind of “trickle-down theology,” whereby concern for the state of the affluent has inevitable overflowing benefits to the materially poor. Without rehearsing again his argument, it is clear this would be a mischaracterisation and simplification of his position. But the question raises a key problem, which is a matter of common language usage or semantics. This is not catastrophic to his claim, but likely a matter of confusion and of reception—now and into the future—which should not be overlooked. This kind of confusion could also reasonably lead toward inaccurate presumptions about the economic and political positions of the author. And while

⁸⁰⁹ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 103.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

Borgmann has no intention of prioritising outreach to the rich over the materially destitute, we might add here that his philosophy and theology do seem to be situated *less* in circumstances of crisis⁸¹² and more amidst baseline conditions of peacetime prosperity. Despite his strenuous concern for climate change, what comes across, in his work, is a presumption of technological and economic expansion and security. He is concerned to find the underrecognised forms of suffering in such an epoch. This leaves less emphasised the questions: what then of war, of unexpected disruption or devastation (climatic or otherwise)? Gutiérrez, on the hand, provides a grounding of Borgmann among less stable circumstances.

Second, Borgmann appears to be too bleak or presumptive in his view that the good news no longer finds a meaningful theological nexus among the materially destitute. His argument about material poverty being a difficult and contradictory setting for the promise of salvation notwithstanding, it is unclear that the poorest and most oppressed are no longer a most meaningful location for the reception and celebration of the good news. As a more speculative point, I wonder if despair and cynicism for the scandal of existing poverty (and a shift to juridical, rights-based, language) is not more reflective of those affluent who are fighting on behalf of the poor, than the poorest themselves. Borgmann, in applying the lens of a dominant device paradigm, has made, I believe, too arid the conditions of receptivity among the poor—the poor which this project notices Gutiérrez is situated considerably closer.

Overall, Borgmann has been helpful to note how much the contemporary world has radically transformed since the biblical accounts of poverty and one is cautioned about absolutising theological categories which are tied to historically contingent notions of

⁸¹² I am not suggesting that Borgmann does not appreciate present crises in the public consciousness or that his diagnosis of advanced poverty is not, for him, urgent. I am simply pointing out that the problems for which he is concerned seem to assume a stability in the Western liberal democratic order.

liberation. However, in locating forms of impoverishment amongst the affluent, Borgmann places himself in a rather tenuous position. To one side, there are advanced technological citizens which are both proud and captured by the accomplishments and promise of technology. Here Borgmann confronts a type of technological hubris creating its own blind spots about consequential captivity and deprivation. Such a proud and captured audience would seem difficult to convince. And on the other side, there is an ongoing vein of theological production based upon and maintaining certain rigorous notions of global poverty and oppression. This is what Althaus-Reid calls “an extension of the capitalist market of theological production of goods”⁸¹³ in the North Atlantic, which is wedded to “essentializing colonial identities.” She argues, “One may think that the poor in Latin America use uniforms, speak the same language, have the same beliefs, and look the same.”⁸¹⁴ Here, Borgmann is disturbing what can be viewed as an ongoing cottage industry. For either side (the enraptured techno-citizen or theologians maintaining certain notions of poverty/privilege), Borgmann is not easily received. *Nevertheless, this project agrees that unless a kind of poverty is realised, advanced technological citizens are inclined to believe they are more often the masters of their own fate, prone to approach the world as lords and managers. We also risk missing the significance of things less or unappreciated in a commodifying age of technology. Further, we risk endowing this way of life upon those whose circumstances we seek to redress.*

With Borgmann we can understand that a lack of concern for the destitute is not simply a moral matter, or one of resisting or avoiding metanoia. It is also born of a conditioning of persons which operates on at least two levels. On one level, more in keeping with Borgmann, the sequestered (cocooned) person with a fixation on identity and

⁸¹³ Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid, “Gustavo Gutiérrez Goes to Disneyland: *Theme Park Theologies* and the Diaspora of the Discourse of the Popular Theologian in Liberation Theology,” in *Interpreting Beyond Borders*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (London: Bloomberg Publishing, 2000), 42, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁸¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 40. (Found in footnote no.3 within the article).

becoming is inattentive and removed. Waters describes it this way, “In fixating on the will as the paramount feature of their being, later moderns have become self-absorbed. The drama of being becomes *my* drama. *My* survival, *my* flourishing commands one’s attention. The passing is confused with the lasting.”⁸¹⁵ Waters goes on to say, “technology is proficient at reinforcing this misperceived centering.”⁸¹⁶ The second level, which has been explored in this study and which goes out differently from Borgmann, is that attention colonisation also appears under a guise of choice. Yet, in fact, as we have seen, it is increasingly a matter of subtle and persuasive nudging, tuning, herding and manipulating that modifies thinking and behaviour beyond the boundaries of personal or group choice. The degree to which a culture is also complicit with this way of being is a relevant question, but ultimately found unnecessary for our purposes here. We see persons as bearing up underneath layers of sophisticated design, toward certain outcomes and profit centres. It is an age of increasing attentional fragmentation, including of instrumentalisation by algorithm. This results in an augmenting of the world which persons are often unaware and is enabled through profound asymmetries in power.

Regarding Gutiérrez, it might seem that, given his lack of a larger conception of technology, his three definitions of poverty are then simply outdated. However, this would, I believe, concede Borgmann and a view from the centres of techno-culture as unhelpfully normative. Again, while this project begins with a view from within a culture of technology, we also seek a larger conception of poverty and the relatedness between poverty inside and outside this, albeit expanding, culture of technology. While it is unlikely that Gutiérrez would recognise that a contemporary technological world has resulted in his cleaving of material and spiritual poverty, I believe his three meanings for

⁸¹⁵ Waters, “Willful Control and Controlling the Will: Technology and Being Human,” *Religions* 8, no.5 (2017): 4, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8050090>.

⁸¹⁶ *Ibid.*

poverty are, nevertheless, also essential for understanding poverty today. Material poverty, as a contemporary evil, must be understood and received in its own grim terms. Spiritual poverty operates, when separated from material poverty, as an almost orphaned condition in search of some kind of material (this includes psychological) grounding. In the face of what sufficiently wearisome circumstance does spiritual poverty reach out in a contemporary age? Despite its orphaned condition, this childlike openness to God, toward a positive vulnerability, is a critically necessary state for the reception of the good news. Gutiérrez' view of poverty as solidarity concretises the preferential option for the poor as a real and physical commitment to the poor. The preferential option serves to anchor a view of reality itself, to help order it, and it haunts any project which would unwittingly move away from the cries of the poor. As was made clear in Chapter 6, Gutiérrez' openness to novel and surreptitious forms of poverty is helpful for this project and provides a meaningful opening toward an expanded understanding of poverty today.

The Problem of the First Step

I will conclude this comparative analysis of Gutiérrez and Borgmann's positions on poverty by stepping back to make a crucial broader point which impact us here and is necessary as a result of our work on attention colonisation in Chapter 2. I will lay out a broad methodological problem for Gutiérrez and Latin American liberation theology and show how Borgmann shares a similarly mistaken view, which I call *the problem of the first step*.

Let us recall the general method and epistemology of liberation theology. Following the Second Vatican Council, the particular scandal of the poor in Latin America would give rise to a theology that, as Roberto Oliveros has said, would "discover the suffering face of Christ in the poor and thus correctly to situate [its] theological

perspective. Theology does not have the first word. Theology is the second word.”⁸¹⁷

This is theology rooted in experience and action, urgently sensitive to the challenges and dehumanization in its midst *now*, or what Clodovis Boff called “a living contact with the struggle of the poor.”⁸¹⁸

However, when confronted with industrialised attention colonisation, one might ask a practical question: how does theology and the church, more broadly, *actually* begin to (re)discover the poor and suffering planet? One could argue that the contemporary technocitizen is more aware of both local and global conditions of inequality, suffering and discrimination precisely because of the workings of the technosystem. The minds-eye, if you will, of the collective technosystem bears a heat which can quickly move markets, governments and institutions. We might think of, for example, Black Lives Matter, Me Too or a global COVID-19 vaccination campaign. The question, though, is whether generalised awareness/action via the technosystem is of the same sort as Boff’s notion of “living contact with the struggle of the poor.” To answer this question (and we cannot adequately here) would require a more developed understanding of what Gutiérrez, Boff and others understand as minimally necessary levels of engagement. The problem of the first step is the main concern here. The problem of the first step is that, in an age of increasing attention colonisation, persons may not be aware of the way that the culture of technology shapes, binds and preconditions our actions.⁸¹⁹ Moreover, thinking with Busta in Chapter 5, the problem of the first step is that sincere actions against injustice, or even defiant declarations of the unrecognised dignity of one’s own group, can also reinforce the technosystem and an endless cycle of grievances and perpetuated fissures to be

⁸¹⁷ Oliveros, “History of the Theology of Liberation,” 12.

⁸¹⁸ C. Boff, “Epistemology and Method,” 64.

⁸¹⁹ Here we can add that liberation theologians’ consistent concern for metanoia (which can read as an almost self-metanoia) for those of the Global North can also reflect the problem of the first step. The agency, experiences, and imagination which help make one receptive to processes of change/conversion are often assumed too optimistically for those in affluent technological societies.

recapitalised or commodified. To summarise, in the context of industrialised distraction or the larger forces of techno-capitalistic escalation, it is necessary, it seems, to *first* somehow reclaim attention in order to manifoldly engage with the suffering poor and vulnerable planet.

As we have reviewed in Chapter 1, the general methodology and epistemology of Latin American liberation theology is not a monolith. However, theology being the second step after discovering and committing to the suffering face of Christ in the oppressed, is very common among early liberationists, as we have just seen from Boff and outlined in Chapter 1. Recall, though, an evolution in Gutiérrez' thought: while discourses on faith remain the second step, the beginning point in praxis is now "continually enriched by silence." Theology "comes after the silence of prayer and after commitment."⁸²⁰ I observe this later, in Gutiérrez' book *On Job* where Gutiérrez states, "We can say that the first stage is *silence*, the second is *speech*."⁸²¹ This notion that the first step is not simply of praxis but is action somehow infused with silence or contemplation, has tremendous opportunity for a liberation theology of technology.⁸²² It speaks to the larger concern for methods of decolonisation from attention merchants and surveillance capitalists. Unfortunately, the problem of the first step is still relevant here. We are still wondering how right action (albeit now infused with contemplation) is stirred up in an age of technology if de-escalation away from colonisation is not taken as a first course of action.

And, for Borgmann, as I have argued in Chapter 5, despite his concerns for captivity and deprivation in the device paradigm, he remains too sanguine for the levels of agency required to redress problems of atrophy and unconsciousness. In emphasising the

⁸²⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 136.

⁸²¹ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, *xiii*.

⁸²² As was stated at the conclusion of Chapter 5, contemplation, while understood as having tremendous opportunity to retard attention colonisation and reorder right action, cannot be adequately taken up within the scope of this project.

self-sufficiency of the techno-citizen, he is overlooking the attenuated agency of lay citizens in this age of advanced colonisation and the urgency for liberation from these conditions. I believe the sorts of injuries or harms already manifesting in attention colonisation and surveillance capitalism must, therefore, be addressed in the earliest courses of reform.

Together, I am arguing that both Gutiérrez and Borgmann are not sufficiently sensitive to a profound state of attenuated agency for citizens in an age of technology—whether it be for citizens that locate meaning in focal things and practices (Borgmann) or for conversion in order to enter the world of the poor (Gutiérrez). While Gutiérrez reflects a willingness to locate sources of oppression, he has, in my reading, not properly located any such (techno-capitalistic) actors in the Global North, nor how these actors affect the conditions of citizens in a culture of technology (and therefore those at the margins of it). Borgmann, we have seen, is reticent to do the same. Here, Feenberg is a helpful voice as he points out the deleterious effects of the technosystem, including how “technical relations concentrate power in the impersonal, distanced subject of technical action.”⁸²³ I am not arguing conspiracy but wanting to acknowledge that the problem of the first step is one which requires a particular set of ameliorative actions fit for the circumstances.

Conclusion: Metapoverty

Without intervening catastrophe, it is unlikely that techno-capitalistic escalation and attention colonisation will, fundamentally speaking, abate. Even if the technosystem is coordinated toward large and necessary social, economic and ecological priorities, one cannot see how this is liberation for the human and non-human, certainly not in the sense

⁸²³ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 160. Note: I am not arguing that power is simply possessed by certain actors. Borgmann and Feenberg make the effective case for a larger culture of technology or technosystem, which cannot be simplified to top-down power relations. However, Feenberg is also concerned to preserve actual protest/struggle opportunities against those persons who, from afar, are designing and perpetuating oppressive or unjust conditions in the technosystem. See: pp.127-28.

of the *good news* Gutiérrez and Borgmann both envision. I would agree that *poverty, in its broadest sense, is the most promising and theologically fruitful theme for the attentionally colonised*. It helpfully and properly reclassifies (that is, lowers down) technological persons, away from status as masters and lords, toward the promise of good news. It accepts of a kind of captivity and deprivation for which liberation is necessary in a culture of technology—be it the predatory practices of, for example, attention colonisation or a larger sequestering away of persons in commodious self-referential enclosures. It accepts a relationship between this state and forms of destitution that persist precisely because our consideration is bound elsewhere. To this end, advanced poverty (to accept Borgmann’s term) within the techno-culture is not comprehensible on its own, but only makes sense in relation to a world beyond itself. This relationality is what is forgotten through advanced poverty and attention colonisation. I believe we now require a larger concept to articulate the understandings we have gathered, even if it is only the faintest of outlines. Let us now call the larger concept *metapoverty*. ‘Meta’ can denote transformation, it can also denote a sense of encompassing, that is, “beyond, above, at a higher level.”⁸²⁴ In this sense, ‘meta’ encompasses both new advanced technological forms of poverty which are being introduced and more recognised forms of poverty outlined by Gutiérrez. It is *beyond* poverty only in that it is now necessary to express the larger interplay between brute and advanced poverty which is ongoing and exacerbated in the unfolding technification of the world. In other words, we seek the beginning of a way to express the relation of technological poverty (such as attention colonisation) and the inconvenient presence of the hungry, the sick and forgotten.⁸²⁵ Metapoverty carries reference to Neal Stephenson’s

⁸²⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “meta,” accessed 20 Oct 2022, <https://www-oed-com.manchester.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/117150?rskey=fmAwHJ&result=4#eid>.

⁸²⁵ It is also possible to add the relation to and effects for a suffering planet/climate collapse under this term.

1992 novel *Snow Crash*.⁸²⁶ In Stephenson's book, physical 'reality' and the virtual/online or non-physical reality exist in parallel. The metaverse is what Stephenson calls the virtual world. Here we can also think of Facebook's recent corporate rebranding to Meta, expressing, it seems, a corporate commitment to virtual, augmented, and mixed reality technologies.⁸²⁷ 'Meta' in metapoverty is acknowledgment of ongoing and emerging costs associated with the overlaying of a hyper techno-capitalism onto the physical world. Altogether, in the sense that metapoverty expresses both the relationality of poverty and positive paths for its undoing, it is always simultaneously critical/constructive.

We can begin to understand metapoverty by placing, face-to-face, Gutiérrez' understandings of poverty opposite Borgmann's advanced poverty—like two realities on either side of a screen. On one side, arriving from the epicentres of technology we find advanced poverty, expressed in this thesis as captivity and deprivation in (as one pronounced example) attention colonisation. Poverty, on this side, is a realisation that living contact with the poor and vulnerable is presently attenuated by sophisticated persuasion technologies. The techno-citizen finds hope in rewilding, wonder and unplanned grace that is beyond the narrowing measures of control. It also invites him or her to consider what could effectively disrupt, retard, and reform the attention economy and surveillance capitalism.

Borgmann has shown technology as a tremendous good, but its culture as increasingly bereft of frailty. This is frailty as a condition for the advent of the good news. It is also frailty in the sense of the people, things, and practices which are disaggregated in commodification, and those that are outside or on the periphery of the culture—those unnecessary, unseemly, and/or unwanted people, things, and practices, both human and

⁸²⁶ Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, London: Roc Books, 1993.

⁸²⁷ Nathan Dufour Oglesby, "Facebook and the True Meaning of 'Meta,'" *Future*, BBC, 15 Nov 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20211112-facebook-and-the-true-meaning-of-meta>.

non-human. We can summarise that there is for the techno-citizen a positive sense of poverty (both ameliorative and yet costly) as commitment or vow toward re-burdenment and rewilding the technosystem, both as remediation of attention colonisation, but moreover for those we cannot quite reach on the other side of the screen. In essence, Borgmann writes from and for a techno-culture in advanced poverty, but always also toward those in brute poverty.

On the other side, Gutiérrez can be understood as writing in order to provide hope for those in material poverty, outside the walls of any affluent techno-empire. He, in essence, picks up the blade which has bludgeoned the poor and uses it to puncture the rhetoric and absurd abstractions of the oppressor. In this way, he lends the materiality and gravity of the poor to the rich, such that they may begin to return down to earth.⁸²⁸

Material poverty here haunts strident techno-evangelisation as it interrogates by which means the promises of technology are underwritten. It places the bloody fingerprints of hidden externalities back upon the sleek devices and dreams of our age. The preferential option for the poor orders the techno-citizens' reality toward what will bring them back to the earth. In Gutiérrez' third meaning of poverty as solidarity, we also see this re-gravitation and a direct plea through the conceptual glass of metapoverty. Gutiérrez can be understood as both grieving and imploring those on the other side, whose own (rather bloodless, pleasant) afflictions have arrested them. In this sense, Gutiérrez writes from and for a certain Latin American context, but always also toward those in advanced poverty.

I have not said much about spiritual poverty for Gutiérrez, nor much of Borgmann's focal concerns, which are, for him, the openings of grace and wonder in a culture of technology. This project has understood, with Borgmann, that feats of science and technology have caused the cleaving of Gutiérrez' material and spiritual poverty. It

⁸²⁸ Latour, *Down to Earth*, 2.

has also separated advanced and brute poverty for Borgmann. Advanced poverty is where Borgmann wants to make a key and decisive location for the good news. While I have retained advanced poverty in this conceptual device, I have also said that advanced poverty is prone to confusion and carries unhelpful barriers for reception. Keeping this in mind, and in considering the interchange within this screen of metapoverty, it is possible to narrow advanced poverty down, if it is helpful, to *anti-spiritual poverty*, which is perhaps a more precise organising term and a foremost problem within metapoverty for the technocitizen.

Borgmann wants to see advanced poverty as a setting for the advent of the good news, but I have criticised that he has left this cocooned person in a conflicted state of sufficient agency/captivity. This study would find attention colonisation and technocapitalistic escalation as much too reinforcing to reasonably appeal to those sequestered persons to *simply* take the basic steps for focal things and practices, at least as a first course of action. Of course some will and do. But the *problem of the first step* has identified the necessity of liberation along certain lines. Poverty in its more constructive and voluntary sense, that is as austerity, as degrees of re-burdenment, as re-gravitation, as engagement and the readmittance of noise, addresses more directly *anti-spiritual poverty, which is here bound preoccupation or distraction, and therefore the lack of preparation for the good news and its promise of animating joy*. Poverty, in the sense I am discussing now, allows us to better comprehend both particular and generalised conditions of suffering and limitation (of others and in increasing awareness, ourselves) and simultaneously stimulates a tremendous hunger for hope and meaning which is often anaesthetised away in a culture of technology. There is a connection here to Gutiérrez as he is concerned to, in a sense, reconstitute the poor from their status as nonpersons. A kind of reconstitution away from anti-spiritual poverty is not unlike re-membering those who are forgotten or ignored in

material poverty, in this case it is allowing the significance of certain things to bring us closer to the ground, which is also progress towards wholeness ourselves.

To return to Borgmann's cocoon, I have suggested that negative states (enzymes for self-digestion and the necessity of gravity) are active in the process of radical transformation. Both Gutiérrez and Borgmann have pointed up the necessity and opportunity for an embrace of what Borgmann calls, 'blessed burdens.' In advanced or anti-spiritual poverty, I am suggesting that these radical actions must be prioritised where and how they are possible. Terrestrialisation is a promising antidote to anti-spiritual poverty as it serves to retard calamitous intensification and open new social, political and spiritual vistas within the technosystem. In Chapter 5, I wondered whether certain practices such as contemplation or poverty could become two important possible loci of resourcement from within liberation theology. As was said, there has not been space to investigate contemplation, but in poverty we have decisively affirmed this opening in liberation theology.

The goal, it should be said, in metapoverty, is for those in advanced poverty to work toward dissolving the screen between advanced poverty and those suffering on the other side. I am outlining metapoverty from the viewpoint of the attentionally colonised. To say any more for Gutiérrez' side of the screen would be, it seems, a matter for others. I do not want to suggest the goal for those on Gutiérrez' side of the screen, except perhaps to point to the words of Gutiérrez himself, who spoke of "the battle of justice and peace, defending one's life and liberty, seeking a greater democratic participation in the decisions of society...and committing oneself to the liberation of every person."⁸²⁹ In the end, we

⁸²⁹ Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," 236-37.

cannot anticipate how an unjust separation in metapoverty's screen will be addressed by those yet left behind.⁸³⁰

This chapter has been concerned to understand poverty in an age of technology, both its relationality and the possible routes of reform and/or resistance. Making the case for what I have ultimately called metapoverty, even in its early outline, has taken some effort in this chapter. Amidst such a lengthy theoretical task, there has been a noticeable absence of examples for what this could mean in light of this study, including actions or practices of obfuscation, circumscription and re-gravitation. In turning to this work's concluding chapter, in addition to summarising my research, I will briefly indicate a number of possible meanings which, I believe, are born from the path of this research. These suggestions or proposals, while impossible to properly develop in this work, are indicative of what I hope is the contribution of this project.

⁸³⁰ I recognise this may sound evasive, and many North Atlantic thinkers, of course, will and do think about how the Global South should respond to global inequality and oppression. In addition to the points made, I also mean to indicate a level of jeopardy or unexpected disorder which would result from the ongoing neglect of global suffering (despite the means to address it). I am also influenced by Gutiérrez' project which seeks to support Latin Americans in asserting their own agency, as against domination or patronisation by the Global North.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

I will conclude this thesis through three final tasks. First, I will summarise the key findings from Chapter 2 through 7. Second, I will raise up the key theological themes which this research has come to understand as critical. This will inevitably point toward future work necessary. And finally, I will evaluate my title, original research questions and aim in light of the results of this study.

Summary

In view of Borgmann's notion of *advanced poverty*, in Chapter 2 I sought to determine whether conditions of captivity and deprivation within a culture of technology, are, in any general sense, credible and recognisable today. Through contemporary discourse on the attention economy (Wu, Alter, Williams) and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff), I argued that the predatory and escalating nature of the attention industry and its greater market perfection through persuasive technologies, satisfied conditions for such captivity and deprivation within a culture of technology today. I have called this ongoing and predatory condition *attention colonisation* and argued it constitutes a real form of injury, an ongoing suffering, deserving of significant concern for theology.

The authors we investigated, especially Williams and Zuboff, understood the problems of attention colonisation in distinctly emancipatory terms, which underscored the possible relevance for a kind of liberation theology. The question of liberation *from/for* was only answered in a narrow and preliminary sense, that is, liberation from attention colonisation is liberation for a human autonomy necessary to pursue goals and values beyond or despite the pressures of persuasive technologies. From the research in Chapter 2, I identified four areas which could be developed for a theology of liberation. These

were: (1) theology and the church's role in orientation (i.e., sanctuary, behavioural architecture, and alternative value centres) for those with injured capacities for attention, (2) asserting certain values (or rights) for human beings including attentional capacities and autonomy from dehumanising attention colonisation, (3) engagement with realities where fluency remains weak, as well as (4), the role of voluntary poverties or constraint as interruption to colonisation in this context.

In Chapter 3 we sought to understand attention colonisation within a larger view of technology with this project's principal technology theorist and interlocutor, Albert Borgmann. Borgmann argued that, within the predominant device paradigm, the salutary aims and accomplishments of technology for liberation and enrichment have not shown a limiting principal, such that ongoing efforts to relieve hardship also invariably work to eliminate even healthy burdens.⁸³¹ It is among burdensome and often vulnerable people, things, and practices, both human and non-human, that we can resolve our aimlessness and understand more fully how to centre and order our lives. Human beings, through skilful engagement with the world, help testify to and celebrate the significance of these things and dedicate the preservation and celebration of their significance through focal practices. Focal concerns being "the recovery of a center and a standpoint from which one can tell what matters in the world and what merely clutters it up."⁸³² For Borgmann, it was in acknowledging and restraining the device paradigm, that focal concerns could proliferate, distinguish between good and unnecessary burdens, and in turn help re-order the device paradigm.

Borgmann helped to provide a broader, and more nuanced, conception of our contemporary technological milieu and the human relation to it. He advanced our

⁸³¹ Borgmann, "Pointless Perfection," 26.

⁸³² Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 225.

understanding for how both orientation and disorientation occur in our culture of technology. I found that his reform proposals were ultimately correct, but questioned whether, in light of the increasing power of persuasive technologies, he remains too sanguine for the ability of persons to restrain the device paradigm, at least as a foremost course of action. His focus on the significance of blessed burdens, amidst a proliferation of attention colonisation, was perhaps his most useful contribution for this project. In light of Alter's observation that "sluggishness is the enemy of addiction, because people respond more sharply to rapid links between action and outcome,"⁸³³ we have begun to ask how the burdens of engagement could themselves be a form of retardation or remediation of attention colonisation.

In Chapter 4, I challenged Borgmann with the ideas of critical theorist and fellow philosopher of technology, Andrew Feenberg. Feenberg concentrated less on a culture of technology, and more the "technical practices aimed at control of the environment, whether natural, economic, or administrative,"⁸³⁴ which he calls the technosystem. As he understands that "practically all significant activities are mediated by the technosystem,"⁸³⁵ he focuses progress and reform through opportunities already immanent or available in the technosystem. As Feenberg acknowledges asymmetries of power, of threats to human agency and the dynamics of struggle within this unavoidable technosystem, he is helpful for pointing up means of resistance or refusal within technology itself. Feenberg becomes an important voice for understanding how "secondary instrumentalization"⁸³⁶ or "resignifying"⁸³⁷ allows those "excluded from the original design process [to] initiate changes that respond to their interests and

⁸³³ Alter, *Irresistible*, 44.

⁸³⁴ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 159.

⁸³⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁸³⁶ Achterhuis. "Farewell to Dystopia," 90-92.

⁸³⁷ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 153.

understanding.”⁸³⁸ While Borgmann will see blessed burdens as existing despite the interest to smooth them out for ever greater comfort, Feenberg allows this project to think how voluntary poverties, burdens and constraints placed specifically against the intentions and actions of the attention economy and surveillance capitalism are also possible within the technosystem.

In Chapter 5, I drew together my working conception of attention colonisation with the most salient perspectives of Borgmann and Feenberg, as well as to further clarify what, precisely, is being asked of theology for Part II of the thesis. Building on the work of the previous chapters, I outlined a problem I referred to as *techno-capitalistic escalation*, whereby even solutions for reform work to perpetuate processes toward data capture and greater techno-human confluence upon the highways and byways of the technosystem, with its proprietary market gatekeepers. I argued that to resist and reform the system, as such, would be to, therefore, take particular actions both in the centres of meaning and explanatory frameworks which are yet undercolonised in the ongoings of techno-capitalism (Borgmann), as well as within designs and uses of devices themselves (Feenberg).

Together, in the face of techno-capitalistic escalation and intensification, I argued for a kind of *theology of human condescension or accommodation*. Here we are taking up: (1) the observation from Alter, again, that sluggishness is the enemy of addiction as it impedes the links between action and outcome, (2) Busta’s argument that, in a time of tech hegemony, one has to betray or divest from one’s online self, and (3), Borgmann’s view that the decontextualisation of things for disburdened commodities also results in the disaggregation of richer connections in the world. This theology of human condescension is an effort to unwind or devitalise escalating attention colonisation through purposeful re-

⁸³⁸ Feenberg, *Technosystem*, 153.

burdenment and re-contextualisation. This could include, for example, making oneself more illegible to the roving glare of an attention economy and surveillance capitalism, through limiting of one's online presence as well as the taking up of practices of austerity and contemplation offline. Here persons renounce privileges afforded citizens of advanced technological societies for the larger purpose of accommodating and contextualising themselves within the world of vulnerable significance. This descending or lowering toward a culture of deeper engagement and the embrace of 'blessed burdens' (which can also be thought of as re-gravitation⁸³⁹) in order to retard calamitous intensification of attention colonisation, is to also open new social, political and spiritual vistas within the technosystem itself. In the process of re-contextualisation, I argued that there is involved a necessary drawing back which provides an equivalent space for other *rewilding* within the technosystem. Rewilding is essentially the process of re-politicising other "noise" in the digital and non-digital ecosystem—be it the noise of quirky, inefficient and suboptimal humans, the poor, or other nonpersons or nonhuman things.

The economic and social costs to self-effacement and purposeful re-burdenment, in age of attention colonisation and surveillance capitalism, are potentially severe—the link between online and IRL identities are consequential and measures of austerity may, in certain circumstances, mitigate personal and collective progress (I use this term loosely here) made in the course of techno-capitalism.

The essential theme in classic liberation theology which appeared to most directly speak to the conditions understood and developed in Part I, including constructive work outlined for its remediation, was poverty. Holding up the conditions of attention colonisation with the work of Gutiérrez (writing from a very distinct context), would be the focus and challenge of Part II.

⁸³⁹ Again, notions of returning to the earth are informed by: Latour, *Down to Earth*.

Chapter 6 began Part II's engagement with Gutiérrez by first exploring, in depth, his understanding of the core meanings of poverty and his expanding boundaries for these definitions to include other contemporary liberationist movements. Concepts such as the 'right to think,' 'nonperson,' and 'absent' allowed a multiplicity of historical (socio-cultural, economic, and political) circumstances to exist under a broader meaning of poverty. These terms, I have said, describe an active *ghosting process* of the living. It is not simply of material lack, but a thinning or deprivation of one's presence. While considerably more could be done to think through the ways in which Gutiérrez' 'right to think,' 'nonperson,' and 'absent' could inform our understandings of attention colonisation, it was enough, at this point, to acknowledge that Gutiérrez has, in his work, inevitably admitted entry for the concerns of my project with a central concern for early liberation theology.

It was crucial to note that, for Gutiérrez, material or economic poverty remains always central and of foremost concern—this is what he had in mind when he spoke of the *preferential option for the poor*. It was important for this project to acknowledge that, in this preferential option, in insisting on a prioritisation of physical forms of destitution, Gutiérrez will necessarily agitate against other assertions or assumptions of significance and invariably demand a reordering of values and an augmentation, subversion and/or replacement of unjust structures. This bold assertion toward right ordering helps to respond to an early question in Chapter 2 for how orientation ("our bearings" as Zuboff said) might be developed amidst attention colonisation.

Beginning at the close of Chapter 6 and through Chapter 7, Borgmann's argument for advanced poverty in affluent technological societies was explored in light of what had been unpacked from Gutiérrez. I was concerned to understand how we can understand poverty in the age of technology, and whether forms of elective poverty could also play a

role in remediating indifference, bitterness and distraction in an expanding culture of technology. I determined that Gutiérrez carries a theoretical blind spot for how systems of technology perpetuate conditions of poverty (within a culture of technology and at its borders). This unintentionally smuggles in techno-capitalism during appeals for progressive integration. It is critical, with Borgmann and Feenberg, to understand technology as the consequential feature of contemporary life—both in its limitations but especially in its shaping for the ways in which we recognise and engage with the vulnerable and suffering.

Borgmann, for his part, despite affirming the presence of captivity and deprivation in technological societies, was found to be too bleak in his view that material poverty outside technologically advanced societies is not a theologically fruitful setting for the good news. Gutiérrez' insistence on the preferential option for the (materially) poor prophetically denounces the rhetoric and absurd abstractions within a self-referential culture of technology which does not always acknowledge how far from hunger, disease or violence we are attempting to progress. The preferential option serves to, again, anchor a view of reality, to help order it, and it haunts any project which would unwittingly move away from the cries of the poor. Gutiérrez lends the materiality and gravity of the poor to the rich, such that they may begin to return to the earth. This is key for a theology of human condescension.

Both Gutiérrez and Borgmann, I argued, have not overcome the *problem of the first step*. Without properly acknowledging the asymmetric power of persuasive technologies, and the conditions of attention colonisation today, is to assume conversion, or even first consequential steps of reform, are more easily achieved than are frequently possible. I have argued that, in fact, the impacts of persuasive technologies and techno-capitalistic escalation have contributed to a kind of *anti-spiritual poverty*, which is itself bound

preoccupation or deep distraction, which mitigates against preparation for the good news, for conversion, and its promise of animating joy.

The most basic of outlines for a conceptual device, which I call *metapoverty*, was introduced. In metapoverty I sought to retain Gutiérrez' three meanings for poverty on one side and meet them together with the contemporary realities of techno-capitalism and its predilection for attention colonisation (or Borgmann's advanced poverty) on the other. Within a culture of technology, we must begin with a greater acknowledgement that there exists a kind of poverty which inhibits the ability for meaningful encounter with the materially poor and suffering. The unwinding of this condition, it seems from my research, is, again, born from elective austerities and measures of de-escalation or retardation which, in their awkward and consequential burdens and costs, also open spaces for orientation and meaning which is a kind of rewilding. In metapoverty, on the affluent side of the screen, it is in these practices of terrestrialisation that blessed burdens re-join with spiritual poverty toward the promise of salvation. As I have said, this poverty is the commitment to encounter which is *both vitalising and burdensome*, and is work to dissolve metapoverty's divisive screen.

In the end, I agree with Borgmann and Gutiérrez that hope is to be found in reclaiming poverty as a fundamental human condition.⁸⁴⁰ To address attention colonisation though, it was necessary, ultimately, to construct an updated conceptual device in metapoverty, fit for contemporary conditions in an age of technology. A key problem (adopted from Borgmann) is that efforts to eradicate material poverty are often to also extend the present technological apparatus, which is the same apparatus which conditions persons in techno-capitalistic escalation and attention colonisation. My project points out that commitments to acts or practices of re-burdening return us closer to (and

⁸⁴⁰ Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 107.

allows rewilding space for) a richer, more complex and unpredictable context, which is necessary for a truly *greater society*.

Key Themes for Future Development

In the final section of the Conclusion, I will evaluate the findings of this thesis' research in terms of my original research questions and aim. Prior to doing so, and having reviewed the course of this research, I want to indicate where this has led us. That is, I want to make more explicit the themes and opportunities a yet general notion of metapoverty could be applied, both in terms of future research, as well as to be explored in practice.

Prior to doing this, I want to quickly acknowledge two areas which, whilst having arisen in the course of the research and having informed this study, could not be taken up in any substantial manner and have been bracketed for future development. The first involves the theme of dehumanisation and the related matters of human dignity and meaning. This project has assumed a certain capacity for autonomy should be positively maintained in the technosystem. We have seen consistently, in Chapter 2 but also in, especially Feenberg, a coalescing of concern for human agency in an age of technology. I have explored the agency and complicity of persons in this context through engagement with Borgmann and Feenberg. Within liberation theology, we also see a consistent concern in Gutiérrez for the dehumanisation of the poor and the assertion of a positive (that is, active) presence for the poor in history. Despite the limitations of this study, further exploration of the understandings for human meaning by Gutiérrez, and its application (or not) within a culture of technology and even posthuman anthropology, is necessary. Second, and related, is Gutiérrez' understandings of the nonperson, and to what degree the attenuated presence of the attentionally colonised (which I have referred to as enduring a ghosting process) can also be meaningfully connected.

Now, we will turn to the aforementioned key areas for development. These findings are not discrete but overlap and inform each other in a techno-human context. I will briefly consider them in turn:

Poverty as illegibility.⁸⁴¹ While Zuboff argued that attempting to escape surveillance capitalism risks habituation and does not reform the conditions in question,⁸⁴² I have come to understand that to thwart attention colonisation *and* to move closer to a vulnerable poor and planet, requires, at least among some, a commitment to degrees of obfuscation or self-effacement in the techno-system and ongoing data capture and behavioural modification along its lines. To be clear, this is not self-abnegation, as with Borgmann, I have come to understand that orientation and meaning are found in the yet undercolonised focal things and practices. There is a very real concern, though, for who can afford, economically and socially, becoming more or mostly obsolete on today's digital platforms. The cost is severe. Wendell Berry in his poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," wrote,

When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.
So, friends, every day do something
That won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.

And at the closing, he writes,

As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.

⁸⁴¹ The terms legibility/illegibility are developed in: James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

⁸⁴² Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 291.

Practice resurrection.⁸⁴³

Illegibility creates a space for coming down and accommodating certain burdens which an advanced technological society has overcome. It is here that liberation may be (re)discovered.

Poverty as death? Nay, poverty as repose. Gutiérrez has famously said that poverty is death. I am arguing, in a culture of technology, vows of poverty (including for elective austerity) for the re-grounding of citizens and for resistance to attention colonisation, that poverty is repose. Dr. Charles Czeisler, at Harvard Medical School, argues if we slept as much as we need, “it would be an earthquake for our economic system, because our economic system has become dependent on sleep-depriving people. The attentional failures are just roadkill. That’s just the cost of doing business.”⁸⁴⁴ By repose, I am talking about both literal sleep as well as in contemplation. These practices, whilst increasingly possible to monetise, are nevertheless devitalising for techno-capitalistic escalation *and* open doors and spaces for those things that Borgmann said, “engage and grace us in their own right.”⁸⁴⁵ There is an irony here: in metapoverty, on Gutiérrez’ side of the glass, the drive is for inclusion for progressive integration—this is a theology of red-blooded action.⁸⁴⁶ On the other side of metapoverty’s screen, it is now understood that de-escalation is a key function. Repose, it should be clear, is not for closing off oneself but for the purpose of seeing and responding to significance on the underside of the technosystem (and those yet outside it, where that is still possible).

⁸⁴³ Wendell Berry, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” in *The Peace of Wild Things: And Other Poems* (1964; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2018), 54-55.

⁸⁴⁴ Johann Hari, *Stolen Focus: Why You Can’t Pay Attention* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 72.

⁸⁴⁵ Borgmann, *Technology and the Character*, 76.

⁸⁴⁶ As we have noted, Gutiérrez did increasingly acknowledge the role of contemplation and the development of his thinking would be important to explore here. Nevertheless, Gutiérrez’ overarching concern is toward vitalising the presence of the poor in history.

Poverty as an arbitrary admission of noise. A repeated theme within this project has been the designation of noise/signal for digital spaces. We have understood this to foremost be a political act.⁸⁴⁷ Krukowski points out that noise communicates as much as signal.⁸⁴⁸ Noise, in its communicative function, assists for orientation and contextualisation. The cumbersome and risky admission of noise is a challenge to attention colonisation charted toward certain outcomes. This is not to say that all noise is positive, rather, that retarding techno-capitalistic escalation involves celebrating and contesting for certain noise in an otherwise and yet tight digital communications ecosystem. What is noise and a threat for some are to be found as brothers and sisters to others. This has always been the case. Saint Francis, who had ignored and avoided lepers as a young man, eventually found them in his midst.⁸⁴⁹ Shirking attention colonisation and turning to a world below, provides encounters for reevaluating noise/signal in certain cases, and for the retrieval or introduction of these things into the politic of a dominant and unavoidable technosystem.

Poverty as an arbitrary assignment/ordering of value. Both Borgmann and Gutiérrez have shown a bold willingness to assert a certain ordering of values. For Gutiérrez this is clear in his theological reading of God's preferential option for the poor. For Borgmann this is seen in his discourse on focal practices, the good life and in Christian good news. By an arbitrary ordering of value, I mean that in a glut of information, we cannot defer a non-economic structure for sense making and for celebration. This is impoverishment of choice through commitment to those poles which we will pay attention and dedicate ourselves. Waters argues that "it is not clear what purposes late moderns are

⁸⁴⁷ Damon Krukowski, *The New Analog: Listening and Reconnecting in a Digital World* (New York: The New Press, 2017), 198.

⁸⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸⁴⁹ Chiara Frugoni, *Francis of Assisi: A Life*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 1998), 21-22.

seeking in asserting greater control or mastery over nature and human nature.”⁸⁵⁰

Borgmann has argued that democratic societies did not *actually* leave the question of the good life open, but instead have inevitably answered it through a perpetuated device paradigm and the consumption of commodities. In metapoverty, I am trying to argue that Gutiérrez provides an important framing for a transvaluation of values⁸⁵¹ today. Work to expand a preferential option for the poor to that of a vulnerable and suffering planet would also be critical.⁸⁵²

Poverty as arbitrary circumscription. Robert Pogue Harrison has written that until the Romans “went on to triumph over the great forest mass of the ancient world,” that “the forests were obstacles—to conquest, hegemony, homogenization.”⁸⁵³ Arbitrary circumscription is a commitment to a proliferation of constraints that allows (including, and perhaps especially, the non-built environment) to reframe and retrain ourselves to a world of deprivations, boundaries (psychological and otherwise) and unplanned joy or wonder. This was Stravinsky’s idea when he said, “My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles.”⁸⁵⁴ Of Christ’s own accommodation, Waters notices, “Jesus is constrained by the limits of his body—miracles notwithstanding—and he does not escape death. In the incarnation, the creaturely goods of finitude and mortality are confirmed by their created source.”⁸⁵⁵ Circumscription is arbitrary (that is, of an option) until it is not (i.e., climate collapse or nuclear holocaust). But this project has taken the

⁸⁵⁰ Brent Waters, “Willful Control,” 3-4.

⁸⁵¹ George Scialabba, “Last Men and Women,” *Commonweal* 148, no. 4 (Apr 2021): 18-21, ProQuest.

⁸⁵² For a more recent example, see: Daniel Patrick Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology* (Maryknoll, MA: Orbis Books, 2019).

⁸⁵³ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 51.

⁸⁵⁴ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music: in the Form of Six Lessons*, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 87.

⁸⁵⁵ Waters, “Willful Control,” 4.

view that hope for good news is more important than the benefits of collective outrage or sullenness. An architecture for limitations is intended to prepare ourselves for the reception of unforeseen grace, of salvation. In keeping with Pogue, we can then think of Tranströmer's poem, "The Clearing," where he writes, "In the middle of the forest there's an unexpected clearing that can only be found by those who have gotten lost."⁸⁵⁶ If by lost we mean the state of embracing the imposition of certain things we previously diminished or overcame, then yes, this project has come to see, in such limitations, the opening for grace or unexpected world-receiving.

Together, I acknowledge the above themes remain vague. And they are certainly not new in Christian theology, and I would not want to leave the impression that I believe that they are. If there is anything new here, it is only that, by committing to understanding captivity and deprivation in an age of technology (for my project, attention colonisation), I am earnestly seeking to locate or retrieve the most promising meanings for persons suffering in the context I have explored. Certainly many will not sympathise with the subjects of this study (affluent citizens of advanced technological societies). What I can only hope is that, if one sympathises with the plight of those still suffering in brutal poverty (including from global inequality) and for those vulnerable creatures and things within our global eco-system, that it is clear that their plight is inextricably linked with an expanding technosystem. And therefore to not address, as a matter of serious concern, the attenuated state of the techno-human, is to not ultimately address these other subjects in the world as it exists.

To move beyond the preliminary outlines I have argued, it would also seem helpful to study the vows and commitments of religious orders. A vow of poverty, I said in

⁸⁵⁶ Tomas Tranströmer, "The Clearing," in *The Half-Finished Heaven: Selected Poems*, trans. Robert Bly (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 87.

Chapter 2, is at once a renouncement or disengagement with one world whilst simultaneously enhancing engagement with another.⁸⁵⁷ Agamben has done work here to develop understandings of monastic rules as forms-of-life in his consideration of the Franciscan Rule in *The Highest Poverty*. He argues, “the rule is not applied to life, but produces it and at the same time is produced in it.”⁸⁵⁸ Healy summarises Agamben’s analysis as beginning with the seeming contradiction that “freedom...is to be found when the novice voluntarily submits to the strictures of the rule, the authority of the abbot, and the practice of highest poverty.”⁸⁵⁹ Healy goes on to argue that “the problem with ‘green consumerism’ is not its emphasis on green consumer goods but that it asks too little of us...[instead] it requires us to *practice* a different mode of humanity.”⁸⁶⁰

It might be asked here, have I, in essence, been arguing a form of ascetism? I do not think so. While I have repeatedly discussed a theology of rewilding that emerges as a result of the spaces made for the readmission of noise, overall I am coming to understand that sustainable means for change are possible when visions of the good life, albeit necessarily constrained, are *also* understood as missional. I say missional very intentionally. If Christian proselytising was at one time bound up in adventure, in a kind of conquest and of expanding boundaries, today the good life as mission moves in a foremost different direction. The adventure, if you will, is exploring how limitation makes space for good, albeit unexpected, lives. That these lives are not as bound up with techno-capitalistic escalation, that our attention is increasingly triaged and we are primed for

⁸⁵⁷ I am also interested to understand how mendicant orders, immersed in a world beyond the monastery, also utilised retreats in addressing the tensions of action/contemplation for their ministry. I have suggested the study of alternative communities, as well, in footnote 595.

⁸⁵⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 69.

⁸⁵⁹ Stephen Healy, “Saint Francis in Climate-Changing Times: Form of Life, the Highest Poverty, and Postcapitalist Politics,” *Rethinking Marxism* 28, no. 3-4 (2016): 373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2016.1243422>.

⁸⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 381-82.

engagement with the significance of vulnerable things, is a crucial step toward the world from which Gutiérrez writes and advocates.

Final Evaluation of this Study

The focus of this thesis was prompted, first, by recent academic and popular discourse which has framed contemporary problems for persons in a technological culture in distinctly emancipatory terms, and Borgmann's argument that the affluent of this culture are in a state of advanced poverty, of a kind of captivity and deprivation. I sought first to understand whether this condition is credible and recognisable today. Also, how harmful and oppressive aspects of the contemporary culture of technology could be best characterised.

Second, and following on from this, I sought to understand how or whether classic Latin American liberation theology, through the work of Gutiérrez, could be meaningfully extended to these persons. In other words, could persons in anything like 'advanced poverty' today be themselves a *locus theologicus* in the liberationist tradition? Gutiérrez argued that the core of liberation theology is the central place of the poor (i.e., a *preferential option for the poor*), its theological method, and a concern for evangelisation.⁸⁶¹ Therefore, at the outset I sought to follow Latin American liberation theology's method, and, in the course of my research, determined to concentrate on understanding Gutiérrez' understanding of poverty. I, in essence, tested Gutiérrez' preferential option for the poor in light of a contemporary age of technology. Who are the poor here and how are we to understand the relationship between Gutiérrez' poor and those enduring conditions specific to an expanding techno-culture? If emancipation should be extended to something like advanced poverty, what is liberation *from* and *for*?

⁸⁶¹ Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," 235.

The title of this thesis is “A New Frontier for Liberation Theology? A Critical, Theological Investigation of Attention Colonisation in Advanced Technological Societies.” A “new frontier” could be read as meaning that liberation theology, which has already found meaning in Latin American, Asian, Black, and Feminist theology, for example, could, through its own eager industriousness, move itself outward for, *even*, the citizens of affluent technological societies. However, in my title, the subject of expansion is not, first most, that of an expanding theological cottage industry. What I have argued is that, in attention colonisation, the boundaries of techno-capitalism, which operates along certain consistent lines, are advancing and perfecting. An attention economy with its sophisticated expansion (Wu) and the expansion of increasingly persuasive technologies (Alter and Williams), all suggest new and developing borders. Zuboff, including in the subtitle of her book (*The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*), is explicit in her belief that surveillance capitalism is colonisation that is following a pattern of conquest. This is to say that the “new frontier,” with its colonialist undertones, is not the eager extension of liberation theology, so much as new and developing conditions which I have called attention colonisation. In this way, and in view of Borgmann’s advanced poverty, I determined that such conditions are credible and recognisable. We have, therefore, answered the first set of research questions above. We will now turn to the second set.

Determining attention colonisation as a credible and recognisable form of advanced poverty, did not mean, though, that Gutiérrez would necessarily or meaningfully speak to such conditions. While being sensitive to the distinct location of Gutiérrez, I have come to understand that his view of poverty was critical, for Latin America, and also for the North. The preferential option for the (materially) poor crucially anchors a view of reality. I also came to understand that, an updated contemporary understanding of technology, its effects

and the shape of its expansion, must also be kept in view. Together I called this metapoverty, and its earliest outline (from the perspective of those in advanced technological societies) was something like a theology of human condescension or accommodation. In the end, Gutiérrez' view of poverty, is essential but limited without a larger view of technology. In metapoverty I have attempted to update Gutiérrez' conceptions with the benefit of a larger and deeper view of contemporary technology.

Liberation for those in attention colonisation, and techno-capitalistic escalation, is *from* an ongoing ghosting process, whereby the world of things dissolves toward self-referential comforts and disburdenment. Liberation is *for* a missional and good life where, in the re-joining of certain burdens with spiritual poverty, the significance of more vulnerable persons and things are engaged and celebrated.

Am I proposing, then, that my thesis (as was its original aim) is pointing to a liberation theology of technology? That is, am I suggesting that this work is in any meaningful way connected with the theological heritage of liberation theology and points to a possible new (albeit significantly updated) application of its core meanings? On one level, I am ambivalent here. I have entered this research with a foremost concern for the context from which I am writing, and to discover remedies for persons (myself included) in these circumstances. In many ways, this work, whilst drawing from Gutiérrez and showing the openings I have, also shows itself as distinct enough to remain separate. On another level, I can see this work as nothing more than the theological evolution of classic liberation theology, moving along the same arc the entire world increasingly progresses in an age of technology. In addition to aforementioned findings, it is along this latter level, that I have concluded this work contributes. In noble attempts to eradicate suffering, and in conditioning away from burdens, we have displaced poverty as a fundamental concern—engagement with the poor and suffering planet, in a culture of technology, is

attenuated. The recovery of poverty, along the lines I have explored, is critical for the poor in Gutiérrez' midst, and for the affluent citizens of expanding advanced technological societies. We are now, it seems to me, attempting to descend the gradient, with hope and joy for today and tomorrow.

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