

The “razón de fuerza mayor” and barbarism. Eduardo Nicol and Michel Henry on the Technique

La “razón de fuerza mayor” y la barbarie. Eduardo Nicol y Michel Henry sobre la Técnica

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ABSTRACT

The question of technique is a theme that has engaged the reflections of many contemporary philosophers. Among these, Eduardo Nicol and Michel Henry also took up the theme to identify and underline those problematic articulations of technological development which, according to the two thinkers, negatively affect subjectivity. In fact, despite the differences –contextual and perspective– for both authors the problem of the technique consists in a reduction of human existence to mere automatism, generating a loss of the authentic meaning of life. Thus, for Nicol this is evidenced by the emergence of force majeure, and for Henry by the resurgence of the dimension of barbarism.

Keywords: Eduardo Nicol, Michel Henry, barbarism, technique, philosophy of technology

RESUMEN

La cuestión de la técnica es un tema que ha ocupado las reflexiones de muchos filósofos contemporáneos. Entre ellos, Eduardo Nicol y Michel Henry también abordaron el tema para identificar y subrayar aquellas articulaciones problemáticas del desarrollo tecnológico que, según los dos pensadores, afectan negativamente a la subjetividad. De hecho, a pesar de las diferencias - contextuales y de perspectiva - para ambos autores el problema de la técnica consiste en una reducción de la existencia humana a mero automatismo, generando una pérdida del auténtico sentido de la vida. Así, para Nicol esto se evidencia en la aparición de la fuerza mayor, y para Henry en el resurgimiento de la dimensión de la barbarie.

Palabras clave: Eduardo Nicol, Michel Henry, barbarismo, técnica, filosofía de la tecnología.

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Introduction

The relationship between the technological dimension and that of philosophical reflection has taken on different appearances throughout history. The passage from initial modernity fascinated by the “calculating” capacity of reason, and its direct applications in the world of nature, to the time of postmodernity (or last stage of the modern era) characterized by a “permanent philosophical suspicion” towards the potential of technological development, has made it possible to grasp with time the intimate contradictions inherent in a conception too inclined to see in the technological dimension the realization of the original form of the human.² Despite this, it is not possible to consider the human being regardless of his indissoluble relationship with the world around him, a relationship that implies the very transformation of this world according to the “needs” of those who live in it. A dynamic that is not simply placed in the context of a scientific reading of reality but implies, in its being *praxis*, the presence of an ethical plot that underwrites the same conception of the *Anthropos*.³ Within this context are placed the respective reflections of two contemporary authors who, from different positions, have reflected on the problematic form of the human characterized by technological practice: Eduardo Nicol⁴ and Michel Henry.⁵

These are two authors not far away in time but certainly in space: the first, fleeing the Francoist regime in the aftermath of the Republican defeat, will find refuge in Mexico and having become a university professor, will spend his whole life in this country; the second, after a very short Vietnamese parenthesis, will spend his whole life in France. Nevertheless, both recognize each

² See, in this regard, the reflections of Hans Jonas and Günther Anders about the modification of the “human paradigm” concerning technological development: JONAS, H., *The imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985; ANDERS, G., *Die atomare Drohung. Radikale Überlegungen*, München: Beck, 1981; and ANDERS, G., *Die Antiquiertheit der Menschen*, Band I und II, Bd. I, Berlin: Beck, 2002.

³ SAN MARTÍN, J., *Teoría de la cultura*, Madrid: Síntesis, 1999 –especially the last chapter dedicated to the axiological dimension of the cultural phenomenon and human action.

⁴ Eduardo Nicol was a Spanish thinker who emigrated to Mexico after the establishment of the Franco regime in Spain. His research is oriented towards elaborating an “ontology of man”, in the context of which he has developed an exciting reflection on technique. About the thought of Eduardo Nicol, we allow ourselves to refer to SANTASILIA, S., *Tra metafisica e storia. L’idea dell’uomo in Eduardo Nicol*, Firenze: Le Cáriti, 2010; and HORNEFFER, R. (Ed.), *Eduardo Nicol (1907-2007). Homenaje*, México: UNAM, 2009.

⁵ Michel Henry, phenomenologist and protagonist of what Dominique Janicaud called the “theological turning point” of French phenomenology JANICAUD, D., *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*, Combas: L’Éclat, 1991). His reflection is presented as a radicalization of phenomenological reflection to show the originality of the affective dimension. About his thinking cf. CANULLO, C., *La fenomenologia rovesciata. Percorsi tentati in Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry e Jean Luis Chrétien*, Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2004; and SANSONETTI, G., *Michel Henry. Fenomenologia vita cristianesimo*, Brescia: Morcelliana, 2006.

other –albeit in a heterodox way– placed in the wake of phenomenology, and both turn a glance at the question of technology seeking its deep meaning.

Eduardo Nicol and the razón de fuerza mayor

According to Eduardo Nicol, reflection on technology must highlight how the flattening of the human needs on the possibilities opened by technological development generates a reduction in the potential of reason –reducing it to what the author himself defines as “reason (or cause) of force majeure”. *El Porvenir de la filosofía*⁶ is the text in which the thinker analyzes the problem in detail. According to Nicol, the criticism of the technological dimension must begin with identifying the authentic adversary of philosophizing: “the enemy of freedom of thought cannot be identified because he is not a man, nor a set of men. It is a faceless enemy, a force that reduces the space of human vocations. His victory will be manifested when the possible ceases to be so, when men do only what is necessary”⁷

For the philosopher, the immeasurable expansion of technological domination has provoked a radical modification of the understanding of the world in which philosophy itself risks no longer finding a precise place. With it, the possibility of a genuinely free and creative life would also be lost. Behind the image of man capable of bending nature to his will, but above all of assuming the role of “destroyer / modifier” of that natural dimension that until recently maintained the appearance of permanence, would hide the affirmation of a new form of understanding that boasts an “invincible” characteristic: necessity. The predomination of effectiveness establishes a regime of understanding that empties the subject of any real will to reduce him to a servant of a reason “in-different” to human fate, a reason that derives precisely from a “higher command” or a “force majeure”: “[...] during their own lives, individuals begin to struggle according to a reason of force majeure and not according to the force of their own reason. We speak of “reason of force majeure” in reference to the inevitable, especially regarding the events of nature”⁸ It is not simply a modification related to the philosophical orientation but a total replacement of theoretical reason with pragmatic reason.⁹

Through such statements, the author wants to show how this process entails the loss of the “alternative possibility”: the pragmatic dimension implies

⁶ NICOL, E., *El porvenir de la filosofía*, México: FCE, 1972.

⁷ NICOL, E., *El porvenir de la filosofía*, p. 24.

⁸ NICOL, E., *El porvenir de la filosofía*, p. 71.

⁹ NICOL, E., *El porvenir de la filosofía*, pp. 242, 243 and 354.

recognizing a necessity that cannot be questioned, and what took the form of a hypothetical choice takes on the face of an inevitable path. In this way, according to Nicol, the orientation that recognizes the manifestation of the exact condition of truth in the world in technological development affirms –while hiding it– the reduction of the ethical dimension to the measurability of the data, of creativity to homologation. This reduction consists in concealing the very historicity of human existence sacrificed on the altar of a necessary knowledge which, messianic, will one day reveal all that is still shrouded in mystery. About this concealment, Nicol emphasizes the slow disappearance of a fundamental characteristic of the authentic understanding of reality –which for him is clearly of a philosophical nature– the lack of interest. Only disinterest can guarantee an understanding not spoiled by the result:

What remains of scientific knowledge, once its *philia* for the *sophia* has disappeared, is something that nowadays is considered fundamental [...]: its usefulness remains. Useful knowledge must be more rigorous the more it depends on its success: practice does not forgive mistakes.¹⁰

The subjected reason for the useful is, clearly, an instrumental reason. Now, according to Nicol, reason of force majeure (or instrumental reason) and theoretical reason (dis-interested) constitute two levels inextricably linked: theoretical reason needs the instrumental level because otherwise, it could not develop, but it is precisely its development that allows understanding the instrumental level as basic but reductive.

On a more advanced and superior level, the re-proposal, such as that of “techno-science”,¹¹ of a necessity imposed by a reality that demands the reduction of every possibility to a single and universal reading would correspond to a final flattening of reason on the first level. Only, in this case, it would not be a question of exploitation due to subsistence, but of a reduction surreptitiously oriented by the conviction that a single interpretation can give the reason for every aspect of reality:

The danger does not come from the success of technology nor from the autonomy of the particular sciences. What threatens philosophy, and so science in general, is the totalitarian dominance of utility. Science cannot serve two masters. If all sciences are to be technicalized, that is, oriented in a univocal way towards productivity, the result will not consist only in the disappear-

¹⁰ NICOL, E., *El porvenir de la filosofía*, p. 19.

¹¹ LINARES SALGADO, E., *Ética y mundo tecnológico*, México: FCE, 2010; and SÁNCHEZ CUERVO, A., “Eduardo Nicol y la crítica de la razón instrumental”, in HORNEFFER, R. (Ed.), *Eduardo Nicol (1907-2007). Homenaje*, México: UNAM, 2009.

ance of philosophy but of science itself. In fact, all sciences *are constitutively useless*: it is precisely in this that their service is based.¹²

The problem, therefore, does not lie in the practical use of reason but the conviction that the effectiveness that characterizes it can be constituted as the fundamental criterion of human action. Technology itself belongs to the human dimension so that it would be a mistake to consider it as something negative a priori.

The danger lies in the assumption of this dimension as the only criterion of truth: a condition of this kind can, according to Nicol, unleash violent and underground forces aimed at standardizing *praxis* according to the conviction that there is no alternative. Not only that: the following consequence consists in the invasion of any other type of knowledge that is, thus, restructured according to a law of necessity capable of relegating to "oblivion" everything that resists identification with the useful. However, this is the point; we must not confuse the victory of pragmatic reason with scientific reason. It is precisely the opposite because the spasmodic search for profit leads to the loss of understanding. Furthermore, with this, the possibility of the exact reflection on man definitively sucked into a condition of neutrality: the reason of force majeure is characterized by a dimension of anonymity for which human action crosses. It is always achieved through human action but never for its benefit. Nicol recognizes its power but, at the same time, emphasizes that this strength does not belong to any individual. According to the same modality, it imposes something foreign to the human constitution: it is rooted in the human condition, but paradoxically, it is foreign. What Nicol is highlighting is the very human possibility of generating the condition of his self-destruction. This possibility corresponds to the degeneration of the very possibilities of reason, and it is what shows the authentic face of the idolatry of progress: the state of barbarism.

Michel Henry and barbarism as a betrayal of life

Moreover, precisely of barbarism speaks Michel Henry about the idolatry of technology understood as the pure truth of human life. For the thinker French, the barbarism understood as the give of a new condition, never considered before, which has upset the relationship of the subject with his own life, and at the bottom of which there is a radical separation: that between cul-

¹² NICOL, E., *El porvenir de la filosofía*, p. 21.

ture and knowledge. In *La barbarie*,¹³ Henry recognizes culture as the capacity of life to transform itself and recognize itself in that transformation. Life, whose most authentic meaning is “the phenomenologically absolute life, the essence of which consists in making oneself capable of feeling and perceiving oneself, before any demonstration”.¹⁴ In Henry’s conception of subjectivity, whose constitution refers to an original affective dimension,¹⁵ the knowledge that we define as “objective” always leads back to a subjective basis; that is, it is inescapably linked to life and its feeling itself.

From this perspective, the objectifying knowledge of natural science turns out to be the result of a double abstraction: on the one hand, it disregards the sensitive qualities and affective predicates of objects to consider only those aspects of things susceptible of ideal determination in a geometric and mathematical sense; on the other hand, the putting in parentheses of subjectivity as sensitivity presupposes the putting out of the circuit of life as self-affection. Life does not relate to itself by abstracting its affections; it is pure sensitivity that feels itself. For this reason, according to Henry, although the natural sciences deal with the living, they do so by conceiving life as a “thing” in a world of things, that is to say, as a dead and devoid of affectivity. If culture is to know about life, since life is both the subject and the object of culture, then science does not belong to the culture because, by its essence, it abstracts from authentic life.

Here is Henry’s thesis: science does not fail to know, but it constitutes a form of knowledge that, for the first time in the history of culture, transcends life to the point of being arranged in a dimension that is not only different but also contrasting.¹⁶ Now, the technique appears as the complete abstraction of life, considering that it assumes the position even of the manipulator of life itself, but for Henry, the question is more complex. “However, the essence of technology –in its double relationship, positive regarding science, negative with regard to life– is difficult to grasp”.¹⁷ In the technique, it is discernible the inverse of an orientation always willing towards the maximum result, which would justify what Nicol defines as “invasion”, by this orientation, of the other forms of knowledge almost obliged to assume the same methodology. Nevertheless, it is not just about this: its most dangerous potential lies in

¹³ HENRY, M., *La barbarie*, Paris: PUF, 2004.

¹⁴ HENRY, M., *La barbarie*, p. 16. Regarding the question of life in the context of Michel Henry’s reflection on barbarism cf. LIBERATI, I., *Dalla barbarie alla vita come auto-manifestazione. La proposta fenomenologica di Michel Henry*, Roma: Aracne, 2010.

¹⁵ HENRY, M., *L’essenza della manifestazione*, Salerno: Orthotes, 2018; and SANSONETTI, G., “L’io in una fenomenologia radicale”, in CANULLO, C. (a cura di), *Michel Henry. Narrare il pathos*, Macerata: Eum, 2007, pp. 155-172.

¹⁶ HENRY, M., *La barbarie*, pp. 43-70.

¹⁷ HENRY, M., *La barbarie*, p. 77.

becoming an end in itself. According to Henry, it is a process that feeds itself, and that has as its objective simply its self-empowerment:

the self-development of a network of processes based on the theoretical knowledge of science, and left to themselves, playing with themselves and for themselves, operating again on this knowledge, arousing and provoking it, finally as its authentic cause instead of letting itself be determined by it. This is the essence of modern technique.¹⁸

This means that techno-science does not already show technology as a derivative of the theory but considers is capable of governing the latter. The objective of the research is no longer “the true” but only what can have actual repercussions on material life (perhaps we could say “effectiveness relative to subsistence”).

If, as Henry himself recognizes, in its original constitution, technology refers to *praxis* –and, through it, expresses the self-affection by which sight itself “feels” in its act of relating to the world– in techno-science, this link is dissolved by the subordination of life itself to the external representation of itself. In the dynamics implemented by modern technology, the categories of rational thought overlap and replace those linked initially to the body and its action, thus concealing the proper meaning and the concrete and accurate dimension of human practice. Nevertheless, the culmination of the overthrow occurs when the action ceases to obey the prescriptions of life, forgetting that it is the knowledge that updates the capacities of subjectivity. Now when technology opened the path of “substitution”, the step towards a new era was marked:

action is possible only in the context of subjectivity and, according to this, as *praxis*. Only in the radical immanence of its original corporeity, the body assumes and disposes of all its power in order to “use” it when it desires it. At the disappearance of this collocation in itself –which characterizes all power and action– and at the moment in which subjectivity is not already perceived as self-affection, no “action” is given but only displacement of material.¹⁹

This is all the actual and significant event: “the crucial event of modernity, which marks the passage from the kingdom of the human to the kingdom of the inhuman, that is, the fact that action has become objective”.²⁰ What is achieved in the age of the full deployment of techno-science is, for Henry, barbarism and implies the reorganization of all practices. If the external objectification of knowledge constitutes the loss of its contact with life, the objectification of action implies uprooting from life through a re-

¹⁸ HENRY, M., *La barbarie*, pp. 78-79.

¹⁹ HENRY, M., *La barbarie*, p. 86.

²⁰ HENRY, M., *La barbarie*, p. 85.

duction to mechanical dynamics. Factual knowledge of life is hidden: “this is the radical revolution that has subverted the humanity of man by hanging over the grave threat already present since the beginning of time”.²¹ This condition is nothing more than the separation between knowledge and authentic action: everything is reduced to the measurable data, and its meaning is conferred starting from the possible reconstruction that the data allows. In this context, life in its fundamental originality, and its most authentic meaning, are lost.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems to us that we can recognize, in both authors, the development of a reflection on technology understood as a fundamental dimension and, at the same time, ambivalent: capable of manifesting the remarkable abilities of the human but, precisely for this reason, also capable of opening apocalyptic and self-destructive scenarios. Through different paths, the two philosophers come to elaborate reflections that do not demonize technological progress in any way but try to show the dark side that has completely assumed dominance in the modern era. Both consider the current state of affairs generated by a deficit of understanding: the reason of force majeure denounced by Nicol does not appear so different from the de-subjectivist objectification described by Henry, and both refer to an obscure dialectical game between his own and the stranger about the human subject. Nevertheless, there is a way out for both of them, which consists of recovering a certain level of humanity: an original level to refer to make possible the “rebirth” of a reason conscious of itself and, above all, of its instrumental self-degeneration. After all, both authors’ philosophical cry is only an appeal not to give way to the impersonal.

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²¹ HENRY, M., *La barbarie*, pp. 88-89.

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