

The Age of Technofascism

Contributed by Peter Crabb
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"If every age has its own characteristic doctrine, there are a thousand signs which point to Fascism as the characteristic doctrine of our time." Benito Mussolini, Italian Encyclopedia (1932)

I sat down at my kitchen table a few days ago to pay my monthly bills. It was that time of year when several insurance bills were due. While writing the checks I fumed about the large proportion of my income that is sucked up by the insurance industry and the other corporate puppet masters. How do they do it? They do it by the decidedly undemocratic practice of writing laws that government passes and enforces and that benefit them and them alone. For instance, everyone wants to drive a car, right? To drive that car of your corporate-cultivated dreams, you must first pay the insurance industry, or you could end up in jail. Everyone wants to own their own home, right? That's the American dream. Here too, you must first pay the insurance industry--private mortgage insurance and homeowner's insurance. It's right there in the fine print of your mortgage. Insurance companies, banks, and government--helping each other out to screw you over.

There are so many aspects of our everyday lives that are coercive collaborations between business and government. After you buy that car that you absolutely must have because the construction industry has built roads and stores and schools and businesses in such far-flung, decentralized patterns that you couldn't possibly walk anywhere, plus all of that insurance, the law in most states requires an annual safety inspection at the service center. You must pay the automotive repair industry and the state to pass Go. Want to shrink your footprint on the land and live in a yurt? Sorry, no can do. The construction industry wrote the zoning laws that prohibit any housing that isn't built by the construction industry. You pay taxes to your municipal government so that they can enforce those laws. Want to live like a real ecofreak without any electricity? I sure do. But, nope. The electric utility companies wrote the zoning laws that force you to be on their landscape-destroying, bird-killing, EMF-emitting grid and to pay their ever-skyrocketing rates. Like it or not, you are paying for that upwind nuke plant or coal plant, along with the mining and air pollution and irradiation that go along with those saurian centralized technologies. By law, you don't have a choice.

The business community would call this merger of the interests of industry and government just darn smart business. Here on Main Street, we prefer to call it corporatism or fascism. As Mussolini envisioned it, fascism eliminates the importance of individual freedom and choice in favor of a totalitarian (he coined that term, too!) corporatist industrial state. In a fascist state, you and I are nothings that merely support the larger entity. Only the corporatist state can achieve the great, glorious technical accomplishments that are mythologized as our heroic collective destiny (recall the industry pimp Ronald Reagan's "Shining City upon a Hill").

Being coerced by law to tie into the electric grid--and the many other stick-ups--might more properly be called "technofascism" because it is the subjugation of the individual and the empowerment of the corporatist state using technologies as both vehicle for profit-making and tool for controlling the masses. Mobile cell phones and service, for example, are enormously profitable for the telecommunications industry. My students tell me their average phone bill is about \$80 per month. By comparison, when I was in college, my phone bill was virtually \$0 per month--I very rarely used the pay phone at the end of the hall in my dormitory. Cell phones are also an ingenious device for social control. What is your typical person in the industrialized world paying attention to at this very moment? His or her cell phone, that's what. That's mighty impressive social control, thanks to Verizon, AT&T, T-Mobile, and the rest, all of whom legislated their way into our lives and landscapes with their industry-authored 1996 Telecommunications Act, signed into law by the industry pimp Bill Clinton.

Technofascism isn't new. The Romans practiced it when they enslaved people to build their roads and aqueducts. More recently, electrification projects, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority during the Depression of the 1930s, were built on the backs of taxpayers who were forced to pay for the dams and power lines that wrecked the Appalachian landscape and then were thrust without any choice into the sparkling new world of toasters, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and monthly electric bills.

In the 1940s and 50s, General Motors CEO Alfred P. Sloan conspired to purchase and dismantle the public transit systems in major U.S. cities and replace the relatively less noxious electric rail streetcars with diesel-burning buses--built by GM. Together with Standard Oil and tire and construction companies, Sloan succeeded in filling city streets with buses and private cars and vastly expanded the paving-over of the countryside. The demonic height of the mid-century car frenzy was the construction of the interstate highway system (a.k.a. the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways (emphasis added)). Ruinous dependence on the automobile was brought to us care of the corporate masters and their government flunkies.

The telecommunications industry today is also a pernicious technofascist enterprise. Back in the 1990s, I crusaded against the deployment of Caller ID in my state, on the grounds that it radically changed the conditions of individual privacy. The telecom industry lost the first round of their attempt to get the state legislature to mandate Caller ID, but a year later, no doubt after many campaign contributions and free golf trips to St. Andrews, the state legislature changed its mind and a new era was born.

In retrospect, my concerns about Caller ID seem quaint. Today, people voluntarily carry around iPhones with GPS systems that enable some technocrat somewhere to track their every move through space and time. We've come a long way, baby.

Recently I spoke with a former student about the increase in surveillance everywhere. A bright 25 year old who just completed a master's degree in philosophy, he replied that he was not concerned about surveillance because he has nothing to hide. Just what they want everyone to think!

Indoctrination into accepting the technofascist reality begins shortly after birth, when parents substitute screens for human company for their infants. The objective is to cultivate dependence on and unquestioning loyalty to the technological system--a key doctrine in classical fascism. Today, most people in the U.S. voluntarily spend about 4 hours per day immersed in propaganda displayed on their tv screens. Children now spend about 8 hours per day using various electronic technotoys, including tv, videogames, computers, and cell phones. These devices are like cherished friends to them.

At a recent faculty meeting on the university campus where I teach, I proposed a policy to ban cell phone use in classrooms. Many students are addicted to texting and checking their phones to the point that it impairs their ability to learn and is exasperatingly disruptive. Older faculty members were extremely supportive of the proposal, while younger faculty, with cell phones strapped to their belts like .45s, said they felt a campus-wide ban on cell phones would violate their academic freedom to set their own classroom standards. The technofascists are winning the hearts and minds of all incoming members of society.

Indoctrination into the distorted technofascist worldview doesn't just affect young people. Ask any airline passenger as he or she is being "processed" through airport "security" whether all of this seems excessive, and you will probably hear, "Well, it's better to be safe than sorry." Just what they want everyone to think! But is all that surveillance and crowd control and profiling and hazardous full-body X-raying really about "being safe"? Or is it the corporatist state at work protecting expensive corporate property (aircraft) from the whims of dangerous individual human beings? We can't have mere people blowing up valuable machines.

And, of course, there is the central technofascist theme of perpetual war. The development, purchase, and sales of technologies of war drive the corporate state economy. President Obama (yet another industry pimp) has proposed a record \$708 billion defense budget for 2011 to fund what are now his imperialist adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. (The very framing of an imperialist war budget as a "defense" budget is technofascist Newspeak at its most ingenious.) Seven hundred and eight billion dollars for high-tech murder and destruction and poisoning of the planet. Private armies like Xe Services LLC (formerly Blackwater), who will get a huge cut of that budget, echo the secret police and militias of all the nasty totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. (For excellent dramatizations of the technofascist police state, see Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here* and Frank Capra's 1941 film *Meet*