

Postmodern Existential Sociology

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A Division of
ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Walnut Creek • Lanham • New York • Oxford

ALTAMIRA PRESS
A Division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
1630 North Main Street, #367
Walnut Creek, CA 94596
www.altamirapress.com

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
4720 Boston Way
Lanham, MD 20706

12 Hid's Copse Road
Cumnor Hill, Oxford OX2 9JJ, England

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Postmodern existential sociology / edited by Joseph A. Kotarba and John M. Johnson.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-7591-0161-2 (cloth : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-7591-0162-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Sociology. 2. Sociology—Philosophy. 3. Existentialism. I. Kotarba, Joseph A.
II. Johnson, John M.

HM585 .P67 2002
301—dc21

2001055295

Printed in the United States of America

♻️™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American
National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library
Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

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Preface

Existential sociology emerged in the 1970s as one of the exciting new versions of everyday life sociology, taking the discipline by storm. The movement was centered at the University of California at San Diego. There, Jack Douglas and his students and several colleagues forged a vision of sociology that was critical of both mainstream Parsonian structural-functionalism and some of the other proposed alternatives to it. The emphasis was on understanding the individual as a convergence of social, affective, and cognitive potentials when encountering the concrete situations of everyday life.

Although the work of the scholars associated with the movement is impressive in its intellectual influence and in its sheer volume, existential sociology never achieved the visibility of other everyday life sociologies, such as symbolic interactionism or ethnomethodology. There are a number of reasons for this. The study of the affective experience in social context, one of existential sociology's main concerns, was absorbed by the subdiscipline known as the sociology of emotions. Another reason is the eventual theoretical and organizational consolidation of most everyday life sociologies under the rubric of symbolic interactionism. In general, the individualistic tone of existential sociology and the intellectual personalities of its adherents resisted the establishment of a formal school of sociology.

One distinctive feature of existential sociology that unifies its adherents is its inclination to give us a romantic way to appreciate everyday life. Existential

Existential Strategies: The Making of Community and Politics in the Techno/Rave Scene

Ronald Hitzler and Michaela Pfadenhauer

People say: Why don't you offer something, as well. But Techno has nothing to offer. That's not a deficit. It's insane to make promises these days. Even the most stupid people know that it can't be fulfilled. It's not a matter of the future any longer. It's not that our children should have it better. Our parents still think manically of always wanting to sacrifice yourself. Techno doesn't demand any sacrifices. Isn't it much more visionary to claim some freedom for yourself and live for the moment, to experience your own happiness? (Westbam 1997)

Critical intellectuals say that Techno is a deeply nonpolitical phenomenon. This amounts to a claim that youthful Techno enthusiasts, or Technoids, people who subscribe to the Techno scene's cultural program (see Hitzler and Pfadenhauer 2001), have allowed the political stance of revolt against tradition, of rebellion, and of commitment to changing the world—characteristic of youth—to give way to an attitude of consumption-oriented hedonism, conformity, and a weariness of politics. In short, the "XTC generation" (Böpple and Knüfer 1998) is said to lack any trace of a political consciousness (Lau 1996).

We would like to demonstrate that the Technoids do indeed exhibit political connotations and that those political connotations are observable if one works from a nonconventional understanding of the term "politics." The orientation to fun that Technoids shamelessly live is what makes them enormously different from those young people who have criticized social conditions and who exhibit a global-existential no-future pessimism. The Technoids' symptomatic

hedonism, however, implies neither simple conformity nor general weariness of politics. Rather, what Technoids reject as tedious is not only the unreasonable demand that they resign themselves to things as they are, but also the strange expectation that they revolt against these conditions in accordance with the politics of critical emancipation. Technoids dance "on the ruins of industrial civilization" (Pfadenhauer 1999); that is, they dance in and with things as they are. In this chapter, we will attempt to show that the Technoids do indeed exhibit political connotations that are observable only if one works from a nonconventional, existential understanding of the term "politics."

TECHNO SCENE AS A GLOBAL WHOLE

"Techno" is a politically relevant issue in the conventional sense, above all for a quite simple reason: The number of Techno fans not only increased exponentially during the 1990s, it exploded. Indeed, Techno's short history is full of superlatives. "Techno" as an idea has continued to mobilize young people worldwide to an extent unmatched by any other music-centered movement before it (Blask and Fuchs-Gamböck, 1995). The European Techno scene is made up of an estimated ten million young people who regularly participate in Techno events and a further ten million who participate occasionally or at least listen to Techno music frequently. The parallel rave scene in the Americas is similarly popular (Kotarba 1993).

Techno can definitely be characterized as a global phenomenon; it has infiltrated world culture (Ritzer 2000). This infiltration occurs not only in music, but also in self-stylization, in visual design, and in event organization. To put it succinctly, Techno supplies style options in all imaginable aesthetic fields. Indeed, these aesthetic style options, which have at their core the shared principles of sampling, scanning, defamiliarization of the familiar, and permutation, have not only long since made their way into general popular aesthetics, but have also for some time been adapted to the aesthetics of the arts in a more narrow sense of "high culture."

Techno organizers attempt to install a globalized concept of the movement among its followers. The episodic unification of the entire Techno and House scene, for example, is the goal of the largest worldwide Techno open-air festival, which traditionally takes place once a year in Great Britain. "Tribal Gathering" is the motto that is used to try to bring together all of the various "clans" that gather around the scene's different styles as if around totems. The

organizers speak of a world religion Techno/House, to which the global deejay gurus are called in to celebrate the spiritual coming-together of the global dance movement with its boundless energy.

Scene insiders consider Techno's hour of birth as a mass movement to be the 1989 Love Parade in Berlin, even if (or perhaps above all because) only 150 ravers followed this first call. Since then, about a million people each year dance on the second weekend in July around an endless procession of trucks equipped with powerful sound systems. Although parades of this sort are organized in many other major cities, the Berlin Parade has the character of a cult happening and an "event of the first hour."

At the core of the Tribal Gathering lies a conception of a Techno-globe segmented into worlds of musical style. Thus, the idea of "one (Techno) world" is communicated at a symbolic level, bringing into being this communal identity of ravers all over the world: "We Are One Family" (motto of the Love Parade, 1996), we have "One World, One Future" (motto of the Love Parade, 1998), and even "One World, One Love Parade" (motto of the Love Parade, 2000). This globalization effect is greatly enhanced by the fact that the Techno scene is closely correlated to modern communications media. The Techno generation overcomes all borders on the data highway, surfs the Internet, and crafts world-embracing social networks.

Thus, the Techno scene can certainly be classified as a formation of lifestyles that—partly explicitly, partly implicitly—refer to global patterns of culture. The scene has created a store of symbols and forms of knowledge that exists more or less independent of local limitations, the borders of nation-states, and traditional fields of cultural activity and cultural habits. One could characterize the Techno scene as an example of a translocal and transnational construct for the purpose of sociability.

While the movement snowballed during the 1990s, with new fans joining every day and everywhere, there are signs early in this new millennium that younger music fans are orienting themselves more and more to other types of music (e.g., hip-hop, crossover, dance floor, two-step).

As a result of its worldwide distribution and networks, the Techno scene is a global phenomenon. Furthermore, due to the sheer numbers of people participating, it is without a doubt politically relevant in the conventional sense. The question is then: To what extent is the Techno scene also a political phenomenon?

POLITICS OF DIFFERENTIATION

Ulrich Beck (1997) classifies Techno as "one of the most influential trends of the future" as it skillfully combines different elements:

the clock speed of the information society, the body as a place of self-portrayal, the eroticism of presentation, the chaotic structure of the meeting places. Techno culture is both political and un-political. (Beck 1996, 91)

In our opinion, Techno is only unpolitical if one subsumes it under a conventional understanding of politics. It appears to us that only those who search for a big idea or a coherent ideology among Technoids can come to the premature conclusion that Techno is deeply unpolitical.

Moreover, this conventional understanding of politics is also to be found in the concept of subpolitics or various subpolitics pursued by Beck. To the extent that subpolitics limits its goal to installing social innovations below the institutionalized levels at which political decisions are made, the concept of politics that lies at the heart of this conception nonetheless applies to the state's administrative system. In a fundamental sense, it is very similar to what Anthony Giddens (1991 and 1994) has termed emancipatory politics, particularly with respect to acts of liberation from systems of power (defined as illegitimate) of all sorts.

To grasp the politics of the Techno scene, we must use a term for the political sphere—reflexive modernism, introduced by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash (1984). We should expect both a tendency toward depoliticized behavior within traditional political systems as well as a tendency toward politicized behavior within the area of traditional private life. In other words, beyond the antagonisms between social groups that have molded traditional industrial modern society, something is developing and spreading that we will here designate—in an exaggeration of life politics after Anthony Giddens (1991)—as existential strategies. These are strategies for realizing obstinate aesthetic tendencies, privatistic preferences, or simply conspicuous patterns of consumption—also in the face of resistance.

The phenomenon of existential strategies, above all, means this: Although people distance themselves from traditional political institutions and (at least initially) from criticism of, protest about, and revolt against these traditional political institutions, they nevertheless struggle in a political sense for their right to their own lives.

Thus, that aspect of Techno culture that Beck certifies as being political must accordingly be based in a fundamental sense on the consensual message that found its concrete form in the May Day slogan "We are different." This slogan appears to be the smallest common denominator on which almost all members of the Techno scene agree. To put it another way: According to their own positive self-perception, Technoids are different and consider it their right to live, to celebrate, and to pay joyful tribute to this difference. It is really fun to be different only if you can make others notice that you are different, so the party people place themselves in the spotlight. In this sense, Techno as a lifestyle is above all the conscious projection, in the media as well as interactionally, and dramatization of being different. To the outsider, though, this attitude is seen as nothing more than young people getting together in great masses, apparently simply to have fun that consists fundamentally of raving (i.e., to act out one's self through dance) to a certain kind of music for hours and days at a time. This practice demands excellent physical condition and often is supported by drugs.

The most obvious way in which the idea of Techno manifests itself as a collective acting out of this communitarian difference is within a social time and space centered around music and dance called an event in the jargon of the scene. Under the umbrella of the expression "event" are assembled, for example, Techno club nights, parties in discos and on cruises, weekend outings for groups or the so-called parades (i.e., the street processions with Techno music), and above all the raves, the mass events held in big halls and open-air facilities.

Within this framework people can still demonstrate creativity and fantasy, for example, through the unaffected combination of the most different fashion styles when designing their own outfits. It is conspicuous that no one fashion style is adapted seriously or as a whole. Rather, styles are plundered, quoted, or, as expressed in Techno jargon, sampled. The technique of sampling appears to be typical for all facets of the Techno lifestyle, in particular in the case of music, of course, but also in the way a raver fashions a particular outfit. Similarly, sampling can be observed in the scene magazines' and flyers' graphic design and indeed even in dance, for which Techno music—specifically the bass drum—merely provides a framework of possible bodily movements (Hutcheon 1993; Klein 1996; Meueler 1997; Pesch and Weisbeck 1995; Richard and Krüger 1995). Most ravers do not

dress in the "in" style of a given season, but rather in creations of their own, the truly eccentric intent of which observers cannot help but notice. There is nonetheless a recognizable will to a certain kind of self-stylization apparent in almost all party animals and parade participants, at least in terms of externally apparent physical fitness. This alone amounts to a difference from society's normal form.

However, we are not dealing with differences, with differentiation, alone in this case. We also encounter fundamental distinctions; we are dealing on the whole with a politics of differentiation. With this politics of differentiation we ourselves differentiate elements within the scene on the basis of diverse fieldwork, analysis of documents, and evaluations of interviews (Hitzler 2000).

DISTINCTIVE STRATEGIES

Perhaps we can make these strategies appear plausible by means of a short historical digression. The beginnings of Techno are to be located within the British pop scene, where the movement's original radius of action was the so-called underground. The kinds of activities we mean were from the beginning observed with suspicion and monitored with repressive intent by the British government, which labeled them illegal. Through this confrontation with the powers that be, the British rave scene became more strongly politicized, in the traditional sense, than that of the European continent. At this time, an intimate club scene was establishing itself in big German cities in which members could indulge in their new Techno passion as part of a desirably selective circle. The movement quickly moved to the United States under the rubric of "rave."

Today, the veterans of the German underground hang on to their memories of earlier exclusivity and illegality and, accordingly, are interested in constructing images of an enemy. The authorities fit this purpose, and so do those who organize legal Techno events—the veterans denounce them as commercial. These heroes of the first hour see in the rave scene things that, according to leftist-alternative criteria, amount to offensive commercialism: admission charges and drink prices, the presence of sales stands, advertising and sponsoring, plus the fact that numerous profiteers of greatly differing degrees of legality earn money on and within Techno culture.

The first followers of Techno moved about more or less invisibly, almost intangibly in secret places, and those locations were only passed along by word

of mouth. With this strategy of invisibility, a subversive politics came into being which imperceptibly began to institutionalize Techno—which for a long time went nearly unnoticed in public—as a leisure agenda and, increasingly, as a lifestyle as well.

When enthusiasts began to make mass appearances, publicized by the media, the scene was imposed upon the attention of the nonparticipant average citizen. In accordance with this sort of agenda setting, the number of participants at these spectacles, stage-managed by the mass media, serves as a political instrument for the assertion of the scene's interests. The scene also employs fanzines, common means of communication (newspapers and magazines, radio, and above all television), as well as missionary activities within its members' circles to animate friends to join in the rave, this harmless endeavor.

To downplay dangers of the scene, Techno organizers have, in turn, called for demonstrations against drugs, while pronouncing "music is the only drug." An example of this occurred in Munich with the so-called "Munich Union Move." The thrust of this strategy of downplaying adverse effects of the scene is acceptance and tolerance for the stigma of being different. This strategy mimics the early activist politics of the women's, disabled people, gay, and other minority movements. To the extent that the scene members advertise for approval of their way of life, their behavior is unambiguously political.

Beyond these attempts to attain legitimacy in the public eye, the movement also employs aggressive strategies that criticize its opponents, as if to say "Techno against the bourgeois rest of the world." An example of the naive narrow-mindedness behind this pose is the response given by Techno fans when asked what exactly constitutes the difference between normal Munich beer gardens and the so-called "House & Garden" events Techno marketing specialists had just instituted. The greatest difference, the Technoids said, was that "gross" people you don't want to have anything to do with hang around in beer gardens, whereas at House & Garden events you meet like-minded people with whom you feel comfortable.

Thus, promulgating the idea that "we are different" establishes an outward means of distinction, that is, it excludes all those who do not see themselves as members of the Techno scene. However, tendencies to draw boundaries can be identified within the scene, as well. The type of Technoids who seem to have the greatest need to distinguish themselves from all the rest are those who see

themselves as "ravers of the first hour" (Corsten 1996; Pesch 1995). They symptomatically insist that the true raver lives and works for the movement, whereas the ordinary party person merely reserves "one evening in the week to pop pills, dance all night and thinks it's all incredibly chic," as one raver put it. Whether one in fact belongs to the raving society is thus defined in this elitist spirit not simply by being into Techno, but also by having been part of it before the big boom, by having jumped onto the Techno bandwagon as early as possible and dancing the forbidden "dance in secrecy." Ravers also mark internal differences, such as having preferences for certain music styles or referring to antipathies between various local scene cliques or "posses."

In this way, all these strategies are employed to conduct multifaceted politics of differentiation, though for a long time it was not evident that there was a particular need to make explicit exactly how members of the scene set themselves apart or from whom or what. In the meantime, however, the events have received an increasing overlay of political content, as it is conventionally understood within the traditional politics of alternative movements. These attempts have been successfully geared to the media, in particular when the Love Parade was registered as an explicitly political demonstration in 1995, even though its motto was "Friede, Freude, Eierkuchen" ("peace, joy, and pancakes"). "Peace," as the organizers of the Love Parade elucidated upon being questioned, stands for disarmament, "joy" for better understanding between nations, and "pancakes" for the just distribution of food throughout the world.

This playful-thoughtless way of dealing with sublime political issues, taken as a disparagement bordering on cynicism, caused all professional critics who associate themselves with the 1968 Prague Spring generation marked by university student strikes to once again doubt that there was any political awareness in this scene. What is more, mottos like the one used for the 1997 Parade, "Let the sunshine in your heart," supported the hard-liners' negative evaluation.

However, the motto of the 1998 Love Parade, "One World, One Future," is more likely to recall the late-modern ecological agendas of the 1980s (or at least Michael Jackson's tear-jerking "Heal the World" ballad) than the thoughtlessness of a street carnival in high summer dedicated to the post-modern fun generation. On account of its apparently pathetic seriousness, this slogan in turn undermines that understanding of politics that over the years itself undermined all political principles handed down by emancipatory

movements. With that, the potential for the integration of intellectuals who had remained critical to that point has most likely increased considerably—which can be concluded from the participation of well-wishers from at least the hedonistic faction of the 1968 Prague Spring generation in the rally.

To what extent the diverse strategies of differentiation and separation in fact correspond to substantial concepts of this declared difference is difficult to resolve. Explicit answers to these questions in or from the Techno scene are still rare. Instead of coming to the premature conclusion based on the observation that Techno is a phenomenon lacking in ideas, it seems analytically reasonable to reconstruct the political implications of Techno from the practice by which Technoids deal with one another by using the existential politics we have sought to define here. At the heart of this reconstruction lies the consideration that people have at least implicit reasons, that is, ones that are practical and good when seen in terms of their lives, to do what they do and to say what they say (Schutz and Luckmann 1973 and 1989).

POST-TRADITIONAL MAKING OF COMMUNITY

In our way of thinking, the historical inheritance with which followers or members of the Techno scene are confronted is reflexively, in their opinion, an additional mentality that encourages them to liberate themselves from this inheritance. The Technoids are now emancipating themselves, from received patterns of thought as well as from the received—or imposed—emancipation from them. They are not emancipating themselves in the traditional sense of movements of social protest. Instead, they insist that they will not allow what others have left to them and served up to them to dictate how they are to live and what they are to make of their lives.

The desire for joy in fun, action, and parties—at every time, everywhere and under the most abstruse circumstances—is what marks the collective fundamental stance which lastingly denotes the Techno tribe as a life politics phenomenon (Giddens 1991 and 1994). This phenomenon contrasts with the politically emancipatory movements of the immediate historical past, in particular the environmental, women's, and student movements. The general pose of moral outrage and consternation about world conditions of whatever sort is countered in this case through the attitude of not letting the condition of the world take your own life away. In other words, you do not let the fun of being part of the party be ruined.

In this way, the Techno scene provides a concrete case in point for Zygmunt Bauman's (1992) hypothesis that specifically postmodern mechanisms of integration and distinction are no longer explicable in reference to their functionality for production. Rather, mechanisms of the older type are being ousted by an orientation to consumption. In other words, individualized actors especially in need of a community band together according to similar consumerist orientations—which they take to be the right ones held by all of the ravers in the whole world—and separate themselves from those people who indulge in other—mostly wrong, boring, bourgeois, and morally despicable—consumption habits (Schulze 1992).

To this extent, Technoids appear to us to be nearly prototypical of the ambivalent existence we lead under conditions of individualization or, to put it more exactly, under the conditions Ulrich Beck (1997) has described as comprehensively insured individualization. The individual is hardly a natural member anywhere anymore. He has been disembedded from matters of course. In order to re-embed himself, he must become a member. As a result, it is largely this experience of being uprooted, of being disembedded, that moves the individual to undertake a quest for community. It is against this background of dislocation, symptomatic for the postmodern era, that Techno promises that its members will at least be relatively secure and beyond question. Techno also promises an at least apparent release from the question of meaning posed and pursued anew by Peter Gross (1994): "Where shall I turn?" (Hitzler and Pfadenhauer 1998; Lifton 1970).

Put differently, the effect of social integration that the Techno scene has upon the individualized actor is quite comparable to the traditional function of settled milieus. Members have a set repertoire of relevancies, rules, and routines at their disposal, which they are to more or less share and follow, at least to the extent that they make use of this opportunity for social intercourse. In traditional communities efforts toward both integration and distinction aim to establish and stabilize a clearly defined and regular relationship between inside and outside, but in post-traditional communities the internal as well as the external boundaries are fluid, variable, and unstable.

Thus, the party people in the Techno scene—in the "society of experience" model according to Gerhard Schulze (1992) apparently prototypes of the entertainment milieu—embody in exemplary fashion the postmodern archetype of "the tourist" sketched by Bauman (1993 and 1995). The one and only deci-

sive factor for one's—in this sense also carrying (life) political connotations—belonging is whether one presents oneself—and does so habitually—as a raver among ravers.

This means that a very precise definition can be given to a group's own Techno community, depending on its individual location and points of reference. The local community is then often found to be made up of only a small group of friends, or "posse," in the company or protection of which members can more or less feel free to devote themselves to the party's pleasures, or some kind of (usually mystified) inner circle with clearly designated conspirators. It also means that at the very same time there exists within the scene the idea of a truly global Techno community that comes together as a party people for an event.

AMBIGUITY OF DIFFERENCE AND UNITY

Thus, difference and unity find themselves in a relationship of dialectic tension and mediation. This means that one is constantly concerned both with being different as well as being part of a unit. One of these elements is continuously being projected against the other that serves as its foil or the other continuously stressed before the backdrop of the former. Where unity, concord, solidarity, and loyalty have just been invoked, doubt and contradiction are soon enough to be expected. Conversely, whenever someone makes efforts to separate, that person is immediately reminded that there is a shared "spirit." To differentiate oneself from the others, make oneself noticed, throw one's own party within the party, follow through on one's own personal show is at the same time to do more or less the same thing that all the others are doing. To be like no one else in order to be like all of the others, or to be like all the others in order to be something special for just that reason—that is what matters. Within this dialectic lies the key to the habitual ambivalence in the behavior observed in mass proportions among members of the raving society.

The kind of community-building promised and enacted here may be nothing more than an idea, something imagined. It seems to exist only through the belief and active believing in its existence; it only holds authority because and as long as it is granted authority. Those active within it typically do not possess just that adequate amount of potential to initiate the institutional sanctions that would be required to assert their worldview. Therefore, its power is not rooted in force and duty, but in seduction, in the voluntary emotional

commitment that one makes in the act of selecting oneself as a member of the communal fiction. Thus, this effectual sense of belonging reflected in the concept that "We Are One Family" may be principally fickle and short-lived. All the same, according to Zygmunt Bauman, "In the moments in which it manifests itself, it can attain a literally breathtaking intensity" (1992, 20). So, in just this way, the ecstatic and enthusiastic conditions and feelings of happiness experienced by ravers, when and to the extent that they have got themselves a "fucking amazing party," appear to us to be quite symptomatic for such intensity. In these moments of intensity, its members, so to speak, repeatedly assure one another of the existence of this community as a whole, just as they do their own individual sense of belonging.

The question of a sense of belonging is nonetheless one that in post-traditional communities can only be answered with fundamental ambivalence, indeed because these communities are only ideas, something imagined, a principally open question, or, better, one receiving a principally ambivalent answer. At the same time, membership in the Techno scene is above all acted out through this collectivist idea of being different. Thus, the simultaneity (of this acting out) of difference and unity is most likely what structurally distinguishes the Techno scene above and beyond specific details. These somewhat irrelevant details include its members' various ways of experiencing music, the scene's distinctive peacefulness in comparison to other youth cultures, the orientation to consumption, mass proportions as an independent criterion of a rave, and so forth. This makes its politics both interesting and—at least using traditional categories—so difficult to grasp.

It is precisely this lack of substance in formulas such as "We Are Different" and "We Are One Family" that constitutes something like dialectical variables in the Techno scene's diffuse or intentionally ambivalent collective identity. This means that these sophomoric and semantically empty phrases can be arbitrarily imbued with meaning according to the situation. Herein lies the ideologically subversive and existentially possible potential that so irritates traditionalistic soldiers of emancipation and revolution. Difference and unity are no more and no less than rhetorical masks for an imagined community that appear to make it outwardly—for observers, commentators, and analysts—identifiable. In contrast, Techno exists and is meant to exist in its members' heads merely in the form of a pronouncedly vague idea. This is the case because vagueness and ambivalence open and maintain optional (free) space,

allowing the individualized individual in the era of postmodern culture to make contingent decisions that exist beyond the inherited logic of justification specific to the modern era (Bauman 1991).

In this way, Technoids are—according to their own way of understanding themselves—not only nonaffirmative. What is more, they reject in a symptomatic fashion the received dictate of revolt against the received dictate of the condition of society. They don't convert societal conditions into dance. Rather, they dance wholly unashamedly within and also with the conditions of society. It is in taking this attitude that is skeptical of ideology that they refuse the imposition of adhering to any big idea that promises a utopian vision in which liberation is meant to be achieved in the future. Instead, what they demand is at least tolerance for the individual's right to conduct or manage his life just as he, for whichever reasons, intended.

The image that followers or members of the Techno scene have of themselves is that of a community composed of a decidedly hedonistic unity based on explicitly nonexplicit difference. What they really do that is different has a good deal to do with action, with fun, and with taking playfully competent advantage of access to the technical arsenal of the civilization in which they live (Vogelsegang et al. 1998). Therefore, Technoids are undoubtedly "children of freedom" (Beck 1997) who, in respect to their existential strategies, obviously have moved beyond the usual classifications of right and left, of progressive and conservative, of revolutionary and reactionary, and so on. These existential strategies are exemplary for these other politics to the extent that they are posttraditional, postindustrial, postmodern, but above all, post-1960s.

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