A History of Technology for an Age of Crisis

Veranstalter International Committee for the History of Technology (ICOHTEC)

Veranstaltungsort Eindhoven, The Netherlands

Termin 13.07.2020 - 18.07.2020 ganztags

47th Symposium of the International Committee for the History of Technology (ICOHTEC) in Eindhoven, The Netherlands

Technology and crisis are linked in multiple and paradoxical ways: although technological developments have precipitated many crises, technology has just as often been proposed as a proper way out. Resistance against new technologies (such as the 19th century Luddite movement or the 20th century anti-nuclear movement), subversive uses of mainstream technological solutions, and some instances of user-innovation and appropriation can be studied as indications of crisis as well as strategies to cope with crisis. In general, members of industrialized societies seem to have a very strong belief in technology and innovation as key to manage and solve crises: in case of the long lasting crisis of the 19th century, labeled the “Social Question”, there was demand for new technologies solving social problems as well as those of industrial health and safety. Although the expression is linked to 19thcentury, the Social Question is on display until today - now combined with the Environmental Crisis.

Politics mirror the paradoxical relation of technology and crisis: although democratic and authoritarian regimes, and political parties of very different stripes, might disagree fundamentally about the causes and nature of crises and the issues at stake, they have often converged in favoring technological solutions to major societal challenges. Attempts to deal with the Environmental Crisis (which is largely technology-made in the sense that anthropogenic climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion followed the expansion of the human-built world) seems to follow a similar path: technological fixes are discussed, ranging
from renewable energy, AI-based efficiency, sensor technologies, electric cars, smart homes, and other 'sustainable', 'responsible' or 'smart' innovations. Such approaches often sidelined non-tech solutions such as zero-growth. It remains an open question whether technology will provide solutions.

This raises the question if and how historians of technology should engage with present-day debates on the ambivalent roles of technology in today's global crisis—the so-called grand challenges to humanity, society, and the environment. The paradox of crisis and technology rises questions such as:

- In which way have crises influenced technological change, and conversely, how have technologies shaped crises?
- What's the role of technology to predict, avoid, or manage crises?
- How can we study the geography of crisis, taking into account transnational and (post)colonial relationships and global North-South interactions?
- In which way did different societies and societal groups cope with technology-related crises?
- How has the historic pursuit of innovation by technology companies and designers contributed to the creation of technological crises?
- What role(s) did protests and resistance against technology play in avoiding or managing technology-related problems or crises?
- How have media representations shaped narratives of technological crises and/or technological redemption?
- Do crises “reveal” how deeply technology is embedded in society?
- What (and whose) histories do the imaginaries and historiographies of technological crises highlight and obscure?

Further Information (LINK)