Book Review: Homo Sapiens Technologicus

Céline Kermisch
Free University of Brussels

Review of *Homo Sapiens Technologicus* by Michel Puech, (Le Pommier, 2008; in French). ISBN 978-2746503571. $53, paperback.

Homo Sapiens Technologicus intends to propose a contemporary ethics adapted to our technological world. With this goal in mind, Michel Puech structures his reflection in five parts. First, he proposes an existential analysis of the relationship between man and technology. Then, he proceeds to a critical analysis of the dynamics underlying contemporary technology, with a specific attention to the coevolutions of man and artefacts. The third part shows the gap between the potential of contemporary technology and traditional practices – philosophical, political, institutional, etc. – surrounding them. Afterwards, Puech emphasizes various strategies to bridge this gap and to serve as foundations for a new wisdom. Finally, from the perspective of practical philosophy, he characterizes this new kind of wisdom, which will modify our relationship with technology.

One originality of *Homo Sapiens Technologicus* lies in the fact that the author refuses to take a technophobic stance. Even though he recognizes, in the first part of his book, the debt that each philosopher of technology owes to Heidegger, Puech cultivates an optimism found in the Anglo-Saxon tradition – Don Ihde, Borgmann, Mitcham – as well as in the French literature – Simondon or Hottois. He criticizes Ellul for focusing, as did Heidegger, on the essence of technology, and he denounces the traditional analysis which assumes the autonomy of technology and its dehumanizing power. Puech favours a more stimulating approach of the intimate relationship between man and usual artefacts, to which man owes his humanity. Non-spectacular technologies are indeed fundamental to human beings: the technologies which "survive" are the ones which have succeeded in contributing to the mediation between man and the world, the ones which have found an "existential niche" (p. 59). The author underlines in fact the essential role of the use of artefacts, which is at the origin of their success and their survival. Hence Puech assures, in an original way, the philosophical promotion of everyday life and of conviviality which characterizes the relationship between man and usual technologies, as he explores all the relevant aspects of the affective and functional appropriation of artefacts. At that point, he notes that we even don't see artefacts anymore when they are well integrated as tools in our everyday life. His technological enthusiasm, rarely found in continental philosophers of technology, leads Puech to consider the emotional intimacy with artefacts to be the ground for a reflection on contemporary technology and on the wisdom it requires.

The second part of *Homo Sapiens Technologicus* proposes an analysis of the laws of evolution of artefacts. Puech draws a parallel between natural evolution and the evolution of artefacts, insofar as the competition between artefacts for reaching an "existential niche" constitutes a form of selection. Many questions are addressed, which belong to sociology as well as to philosophy of technology: Puech analyses the topics of progress, of technological practice, and questions the borders between man, technology and nature. He also proposes an analysis of the notion of time. This may be a more speculative part, as Puech does not really justify his conception of the contemporary man living in the future rather than in the present. In this second part of the book, the author suggests already between the lines a series of ethical answers associated with the problem of cohabitation with new technologies. The major idea is to reinterpret the promises of technology so that man can become actor rather than passive beneficiary.

The third part studies more specifically the "new disuses". It radically denounces the inadequacy and the disused character of philosophical approaches, of political discourses, of advertising, and of journalists' and elites' practices, when facing the reality constituted by new technologies. Puech considers institutions to be counterproductive – Chernobyl for example is recognized as being an institutional failure rather than a technological one (p. 169). The traditional scheme of production and consumption, and the economic growth dogma are condemned with an Illichian radicalism. But here, his antipolitical stance may seem too systematic. Nevertheless, his socio-economic considerations show a faith in man as well as in technology, as will be confirmed later.

The fourth chapter aims at bridging the gap between new technologies and man, stuck in his disuses. The author proposes a subtle analysis of our intimate relationship with computers and puts forward the revolutionary dimension of the internet, more specifically when the networks allow to bypass hierarchies and erase old mediations. His demystification and redefinition of virtual reality are as salutary as his original framing of the local/global paradigm. Furthermore, the ideological stakes of risk management are correctly emphasized as well. A major idea is getting more and more precise: the wisdom of homo sapiens technologicus consists in reappropriating technologies, as well as their risks that have to be converted into responsibility. Here, we can see a form of humanism, as Puech is reminding man of his responsibilities rather than accusing blind technological fate. The reflections on comfort and on leisure are less original, being variations of the topic *panem and circenses*. But when it comes to culture and education, the author becomes virulent. Does education really have to be reduced to an initiation into the submission to a symbolic order? Puech's idea appears here to lack nuance.

Finally, the last chapter develops the convincing theory of "micro-actions". The message shines by its simplicity: everyone can decide to deliver himself from old disuses and to build his own access to the potentials of contemporary technologies (p. 331). We are far away from the logic of dominating nature condemned by the author. In any case, humility and optimism are at stake, as well as the denial of ideologies in the translation from a formulation of contemporary problems in terms of technology to a formulation of solutions in terms of wisdom (p. 356). His project of living as a wise man, who has the potentials of technology at his disposal without being a victim of it, leads him to follow Thoreau's Rousseauist ideal of simplicity.

Overall, Puech proposes a very thorough, engaged, and accessible work of popularization, as it is suggested by the abundant bibliography and by the quality of the notes. The book is indeed very readable and accessible to anyone – not only philosophers – interested in the way technology impacts our life. Puech's pedagogical talents are undeniable, even though *Homo sapiens technologicus* would gain in being a bit more synthetic. To the question "which ethics for technologies?", the author valuably proposes a tangible answer, which is well argued for. The implementation of his wisdom owes much to his nuanced comprehension of the new richness of the relationship between man and the computer and between man and others – through networks. This proximity with computers, in terms of access and of content, should allow man to come out on top of this new cultural revolution as he has been fortified by the experience of more traditional media, struggling with the mindless state associated with advertising and television. Eventually, Puech has faith in man for reappropriating technologies considered as being part of the commons. The book is convincing because the battle that the author suggests is within the reach of all of us. Puech gives us the relevant keys: lucidity, authenticity, civic responsibility, consciousness of a common good to defend, humility, and serenity – values Montaigne would not have denied. His engagement is confirmed by the micro-actions he suggests, which constitute a form of civic resistance. Connectivity will take care of the rest.