



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Technology in Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/techsoc

Creating a taxonomic tool for technocracy and applying it to Silicon Valley



Jathan Sadowski^{a,*}, Evan Selinger^b

^a Consortium for Science, Policy & Outcomes, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA

^b Philosophy Department, Rochester Institute of Technology, Henrietta, NY, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 August 2013

Received in revised form 2 May 2014

Accepted 2 May 2014

Available online

Keywords:

Technocracy

Silicon Valley

Technology ethics

Politics of technology

ABSTRACT

Although much criticism has been leveled against technocracy, the multi-layered problem has been analyzed in piecemeal fashion and has yet to be subject to robust classification. Consequently, it can be difficult to determine when allegations of technocracy are true, and the extent to which new instances of technocracy perpetuate longstanding problems. To close this gap in scholarship, we have created a taxonomy of technocracy that identifies three things: 1) the central domains where technocracy emerges, 2) the basic means by which technocratic power is instantiated, and 3) the quintessential types of harms technocratic discipline engenders. To demonstrate the explanatory power of the taxonomy, we apply it to Silicon Valley and clarify how this contemporary example of technocracy relates to past instances.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction: advancing technocracy scholarship with a taxonomy

The logic of technocracy has developed over long periods of history. Canonical bookends run from Plato's discussion of philosopher-kings to Francis Bacon's conception of scientific utopia, and culminate in Thorstein Veblen's vision of an engineered society (cf [16]). However, both advocates and critics use the term without conceptual precision. Appeals to 'technocracy' resemble Justice Potter's famous intuitive definition of pornography. Apparently, we are supposed to know it when we see it. Such vagueness, unfortunately, can impede both descriptive and prescriptive endeavors, especially when new problems arise and it becomes unclear as to whether the social and political trouble they cause entails technocratic harm.

Technocratic influence was not studied in a systematic way until thinkers within the Frankfurt School Critical

Theory tradition made the ideology a proper subject of theoretical inquiry (e.g. Refs. [11,12,17]). While that formative analysis significantly advanced both descriptive and prescriptive scholarship, it needs to be refined and expanded. The multi-layered problem of technocratic encroachment on social life has yet to be robustly conceptualized. Consequently, it can be difficult to determine when allegations of technocracy are true, and the extent to which new instances of technocracy perpetuate longstanding problems. To close this gap in scholarship, we have created a new theoretical tool: a *taxonomy of technocracy*.

Like all taxonomies, ours is predicated upon idealized categories. For without judicious simplification, it would not be possible to synthesize disparate yet essential discourses about the fundamental and interconnected aspects of technocratic ideology. Aiming to strike a good balance between explanatory power and theoretical utility, we narrowed our focus to three elements: 1) the central domains where technocracy emerges, 2) the basic means by which technocratic power is instantiated, and 3) the quintessential types of harms technocratic discipline

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Jathan.Sadowski@asu.edu (J. Sadowski), evan.selinger@rit.edu (E. Selinger).

engenders. Since this is the first attempt to integrate diverse discussions of technocracy into a format that identifies the essential components, we intend for our construct to be a conversation starter, not the last word on the matter.

Indeed, we hope other analysts will use the taxonomy—or a modified version of it—to shed new light on both contemporary debates about technocracy and undertheorized previous instances of it. To illustrate how this can be done, we turn our attention to the present and clarify why Silicon Valley, through its products and rhetoric, deserves to be seen as a major exporter of contemporary technocracy. Although Silicon Valley does not perpetuate all of the problems that technocracy can yield, we believe it embodies many of them and that our taxonomy edifies how pernicious they are.

Before proceeding to these tasks, two caveats are in order.

First, although the taxonomy revolves around three categories that can be demarcated in principle—domains, means, and harms—in practice they overlap. Simply put, it is not possible to convey a harm that technocracy causes without also specifying where the harm occurred and how it transpired. Consequently, rather than presenting each element of technocracy in its own segregated section, our discussion proceeds holistically and conveys what they are in an interrelated manner. Nevertheless, we do not want the exigencies that constrain the order of explication to mar our goal of singling out differentiated items. To this end, at the close Section 2 we provide Table 1 that de-couples the items and presents each one on its own terms.

Second, although some of our remarks will be relevant to the question of how to resist technocracy, our primary aim is to advance theoretical understanding of its nature and scope. Still, we hope that analysts and activists with liberational agendas can use some of the insights found here to improve the quality of their arguments.

1.1. *The basic ideology of technocracy: method & metaphysics*

Technocracy is a subset of paternalism that focuses on solving societal problems. At its core, technocracy is a methodological ideology, “a belief in the ability to arrive at the optimal answer to any discussion through the application of particular practices” [4, p. 312].

Unlike force wielding, iron-fisted dictators, technocrats derive their authority from a seemingly softer form of power: scientific and engineering prestige. No matter where technocrats are found, they attempt to legitimize their hold over others by offering innovative proposals untainted by troubling subjective biases and interests. Through rhetorical appeals to optimization and objectivity, technocrats depict their favored approaches to social control as pragmatic alternatives to grossly inefficient political mechanisms [9]. Indeed, technocrats regularly conceive of their interventions in duty-bound terms, as a responsibility to help citizens and society overcome vast political frictions. What technocrats promise, therefore, is transcendence: scientifically sanctioned freedom from human frailty. “In this process, the technocratic model of objective necessity replaces the decisionistic model of politics, which

Table 1

This table de-couples the domains, means, and harms that we describe in the paper, and summarizes each one on its own terms.

Taxonomic type	Subject	Description
Domain	Government	Arms of the state advance technocracy.
Domain	Professions	Technocracy is implemented either formally by professional groups or informally by professional cultures.
Domain	Business	Technocracy is spread by, among other aspects of the business world, corporations and markets.
Means	Mandates	Technocracy is enforced by direct, often blunt and powerful, measures.
Means	Nudges	Technocracy is induced by “choice architecture”: changing aspects of people’s environments, which influence how their decisions are made.
Means	Technical mediation	Technocracy is embedded by technological artifacts that structure, influence, change, and otherwise mediate people’s relations with each other, themselves, and the world.
Harm	Political harm	People are disenfranchised and deprived of appropriate political power and influence.
Harm	Recognition justice harm	People’s experiences, interests, culture, and social standing are degraded or ignored.
Harm	Existential harm	People are portrayed in overly reductive terms, therein eliminating characteristics that have been deemed essential to respect and dignity in the modern Western tradition.
Harm	Discursive harm	People’s discourses—e.g., symbols, images, and languages—are dominated by technocratic ideas, thus foreclosing alternative ways of understanding the world and restricting imaginations about possible futures.

leads to the ‘scientification of politics’ and inevitably produces an authoritarian political framework” [4, p. 312].

As philosopher of technology Andrew Feenberg notes, the technocrat’s preferred means—namely, technological fixes, social engineering, and bureaucratic management—repose upon metaphysical convictions. At bottom, technocrats believe that “there is always a correct answer to every technical question and every question can be formulated as a technical one” [12, p. 3]. This conviction presupposes a world where social and political values can be ignored, downplayed, or recast as equations balanced by what Anand Giridharadas aptly calls the “algorithmic imagination”:

The most striking thing about the technocrats, though, is the nature of their imagination—algorithmic imagination, if you will. Such an imagination conceives of human problems as fundamentally solvable, so long as we have

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6851713>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6851713>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)