Technocritique and its limits: Éric Sadin on human dignity in the face of artificial intelligence

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Abstract
Examining the work of French writer, philosopher, and 'technocritic' Éric Sadin, with a particular focus on his fears regarding artificial intelligence systems' infiltration into numerous facets of human affairs, their imposition of a 'universal technical principle' upon all aspects of our lives, and their anthropomorphic and *alētheic* characteristics, this article argues that whilst Sadin's polemical writings provide a useful corrective to more celebratory accounts of such technological developments, his reliance on an uncritical and largely unexamined humanism detracts from their efficacy. Extolling the virtues of a European tradition of thought centred on an ideal of human agency, mastery, and finitude – in short, self-determination – Sadin posits a benchmark against which any manifestation of the technical (*la technique*) can only appear as an impediment to the full flourishing of our autonomy.

'Well before being the object of an intellectual deconstruction in vogue on university campuses', write Maxime Wolfe and Céline Lafontaine (2021: 194), 'the questioning of the borders between the living and non-living, nature and artifice, and human and non-human was the concrete result of technoscientific developments'.[1] In conformity with a now long-established line of thought (e.g. Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 1991; Hayles, 1999, etc.), Wolfe and Lafontaine argue that the objectification inherent in the rapacious and destructive processes of techno-industrial production (as well as scientific knowledge and liberal democratic thought more broadly), dependent on these arbitrary dualisms that seek to distinguish the human subject from its world whilst affirming the former's possession of and mastery over the latter, has provided the impetus for new theories that 'deconstruct the exceptionalism proper to modern humanism, by recognizing the fundamental place of "non-humans" in building a common world' (2021: 194). In order to grasp the

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contemporary world then, they suggest, we must move beyond a habitual anthropocentrism in our theories and concepts.

Whether or not we agree with such an argument, we should not take it for granted that technoscientific developments will occasion the demise of such forms of humanism within theoretical thought. In fact, as systems built upon neutral networks, natural language processing, machine learning, generative artificial intelligence, algorithmic personalization, and suchlike rapidly ensconce themselves within the recesses of our lives, it is not hard to imagine thinkers finding security in a forthright reassertion of human exceptionalism. A perfect example of this is Éric Sadin, a French writer and philosopher who has, over the past decade and a half, positioned himself as a prominent commentator on the impact of digital technologies. In particular, he is a ferocious critic of automated decision-making, computational governance, and the Silicon Valley companies (particularly 'GAFAM', i.e. Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, as they are collectively known in France) that have imposed these logics upon us. But whilst Sadin may well be, as Henry Jones and Brian Sudlow note, 'the most outspoken and most frequently cited critic of Silicon Valley' in the French news media (2022: 1129), his work has been seldom discussed in English-language scholarship.[2]

Sadin's work should be commended for the prescience of its warnings about the perils of algorithmic life, the data-driven society, global surveillance, and what he refers to as 'silicolonization'. For instance, his prediction that chatbots and virtual assistants 'will be set up as almost exclusive interfaces, not only between systems and us but, more broadly, with the real' (2018: 74), which might once have seemed fanciful, is now increasingly plausible. Such claims, even if couched in hyperbole, justify his self-description as 'a 'whistle-blower author […] striving to identify and gather the many scattered and convergent signs that evidence an insensible backdown from certain democratic achievements as well as offences against human dignity' (2016: 37). At a time when generative artificial intelligence systems imperil the perceived value of the arts, humanities, and creative sectors, we need these kinds of forthright critiques that refuse to treat such developments as natural or inevitable. At the same time though, whilst the broad contours of Sadin's argument are readily apparent and remain consistent across his books, the specifics tend to be more scattershot. His declared 'concern for precision, clarity, and elegance of language', which he pits against 'the vulgar rhetoric peddled by the digital-industrial world and its henchmen' (2016: 37), is commendable, but this lucidity of expression often merely draws attention to the philosophical limitations of the claims being made – and in particular, to his predilection for unhelpful and unsustainable assertions about the nature of humankind.

It is precisely this point – namely, the extent to which Sadin relies on a peculiar, atavistic humanism, which combines an appeal to a universalist discourse of natural right with an ethical injunction to live our lives fully, increase our power to act, and make the most of our innate faculties without impediment – that I wish to examine in this article. Focusing on four of his books (viz. *L'Humanité augmentée: l'administration numérique du monde*, 2013; *La Vie algorithmique: critique de la raison numérique*, 2015; *La Silicolonisation du monde: l'irrésistible expansion du libéralisme numérique*, 2016; and *L'Intelligence artificielle ou l'enjeu du siècle: anatomie d'un antihumanisme radical*, 2018), all published with the anarchist-leaning L'échappée imprint, I will outline the key themes shared by these works, attempting to situate them in relation to the broader current of thought known in France as 'technocritique', before homing in on the motif of a sacrosanct human agency, mastery, and finitude, the limits of which must be protected at all costs, which is so central to Sadin's polemic. Ultimately, I will argue, Sadin's proposal that, in opposition to an 'insatiable rationality which aspires to push back against all limits', we must 'cultivate the virtues of sobriety and glorify awareness of the limit' (2018: 248), finding comfort in supposedly natural human faculties and rights irreducible to digital arrogation, leads to an asceticism so utterly

hostile to *la technique* in all its forms it can do little else than urge us to endlessly purify ourselves of all corrupting technical influences in the name of an unattainable higher ideal.

Algorithmic *alētheia*

Decades of research and development in cybernetics and, above all, artificial intelligence, argues Sadin – laying the foundations for the argument he will rehearse and refine over the course of his subsequent writings – has led to a surfeit of industrial innovations that have covertly established 'a technical-anthropological *dispositif* entrusted with securing our actions, optimizing our activities, and even pre-empting our apprehensions' (2013: 27). We as humans have surrendered our 'decisional independence' to 'lines of code that leave their imprint on and *make decisions for* increasingly large sections of contemporary society' (2013: 28), ceding a certain level of responsibility for our own lives. Our present conjuncture is characterized by this new form of automation, a mode of '*computational judgement*' that takes on an almost clairvoyant appearance, opening up the prospect of a '*robotized administration* of life' (2013: 28). The full consequences of this, he goes on to warn in subsequent books, is that, as a result of this algorithmic administration, 'a regime of truth is being instituted, founded upon four cardinal axioms: information gathering, real-time analysis, detection of significant correlations, and automated interpretation of phenomena' (2015: 28) which, following the dictates of a data economy that 'aspires to make every gesture, breath, and relationship an opportunity for profit' (2016: 21), is seemingly able to submit any aspect of reality to its computational processing and, on the face of it, to predict events with astonishing accuracy.

This notion of a new regime of truth becomes Sadin's primary concern, arguing that henceforth, 'the role reserved for the digital not only involves enabling easy storage, indexing, and manipulation of encoded textual, audio, or iconic corpora to various ends, but in automatically disclosing the import of situations of all kinds' (2018: 13). Tacitly echoing Martin Heidegger (2008 [1954]), Sadin describes this authority that has been vested in digital technologies as an *alētheic power*, a power of unveiling or unconcealing, taking the form of systems that can putatively 'assess reality more reliably than us and reveal dimensions previously concealed from our awareness', a *technē logos* 'endowed with the power to state the supposedly exact state of things ever more precisely and without delay' (2018: 13).[3] These systems are now called upon to assess various aspects of our lives: our needs, desires, bodily states, and ways of co-existing, not to mention the manifold physical phenomena around us.

This automated assessment involves more than just putting forward probabilities or making suggestions. It asserts a truth in accordance with which we are expected to act: 'what characterizes the results of these analyses is that they are not content with only producing supposedly accurate equations; rather, they have a truth value insofar as corresponding actions must then be initiated in keeping with the conclusions reached' (2018: 81). These algorithmic systems expound in real time upon the unfolding state of things with an unwavering confidence, 'pushing us to act as quickly as possible and delegitimizing the specific time of human examination' (2018: 81). Their efficiency, air of authority, and singularly utilitarian analysis nips any potential counterarguments in the bud. Sadin perceives something obscene, almost sacrilegious, in this elimination of all uncertainties and disregard for all infelicities: after all, he submits, 'the boundless openness of the real requires uncertainty and an always maintained persistence of doubt' (2018: 97).

For those of us trained in English-language media studies, such rhetoric, which stresses these systems' totalizing grip on reality, may well bring to mind the French theoretical imports of earlier decades: in particular, the millenarian prognostications of Jean Baudrillard (1994 [1981]),

who playfully announces the media's implosion of all meaning, and Paul Virilio (2000 [1998]), who mournfully tells of the tragedy the technical revolution portends – incendiary thinkers who perceived, in the words of Sylvère Lotringer, a 'total war waged by technology on humanity' (2001: 154). Beyond the familiar canon of post-structuralist texts (Althusserian, Barthesian, Derridean, Foucauldian, Lacanian, etc.) that helped transform the humanities and social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century, it is arguably these speculative theories (along with Latourian actor-network theory) that have, for better or worse, provided the strongest Francophone influence on Anglophone studies of media, communication, and culture. To his credit, however, Sadin's work is almost entirely lacking in the lurid metaphysical speculation, fanciful abstraction, and pseudo-scientific jargon of these earlier imports, which blur the lines between philosophy and fiction; on the contrary, it is grounded in concrete historical, political, and technological contexts, furnishing a vivid picture of our digital landscape (albeit also an alarmist picture, at least in the eyes of some).

So how, then, to the extent that such a task is useful, do we situate Sadin's work in a disciplinary frame of reference? After all, the notion of a unified 'media studies', with all the precarious alliances and methodological dissonances this ecumenism implies, does not really exist in France: as well as *sociologie des médias* and *sciences de l'information et de la communication* (see Balle, 2023; Bougnoux, 2001), you also have the school of 'mediology' founded by Régis Debray (see 1991, 1992, 2000)[4], and then various philosophical accounts of technology – the latter of which are the most frequently translated into English. Bernard Stiegler's exposition of the cognitive proletarianization engendered by digital hyper-industrialization (2011 [2001]) is a particularly noteworthy example of such philosophical accounts, one that shares Sadin's pessimistic outlook toward computation but presumes far greater knowledge of the intricacies of academic philosophy on the part of its readers.

In some respects, one could argue Sadin's cathectic hostility to Silicon Valley – in defiance of 'the idea that technical developments, artificial intelligence in particular, are part of a virtuous and inevitable trajectory of things that we must follow in the interests of all' (2018: 19) – functions as a mirror image of, say, philosopher Pierre Lévy's strategic optimism (which itself had considerable impact on English-language cyberculture in its conceptualization of virtuality and collective intelligence), whereby the latter envisions a 'great planetary virtual society in which no territorial power, no physical distance comes to curb interactions, cooperative competition, communication, multifaceted sociability, and openness' (2000: 74). It also shares features with Yves Citton's concerns about 'digital intrastructures' (2016) that exacerbate the heteronomy at the heart of our communities and subjectivities and Achille Mbembe's postcolonial philosophy (2024 [2020]) with its bleak depiction of automation as extraction and the reduction of knowledge to that which is amenable to marketization and algorithmic processing. Sadin's work is probably most readily comparable though to that of English-language writers like Neil Postman (1992), Jaron Lanier (2010), Sherry Turkle (2011), Evgeny Morozov (2013), Nicholas Carr (2015), Cathy O'Neil (2016), and Shoshana Zuboff (2019), the output of whom has been designated in France with the label of '*technocritique*'. This broad appellation is used to describe a plethora of thinkers, dating back to the eighteenth century, united only by their scepticism toward the notion of technological progress, but it is particularly associated with the French philosopher Jacques Ellul, from whom Sadin draws decisive influence.[5]

The profane anthropomorphism of artificial intelligence

The basic technocritical attitude, as exemplified by Ellul's writings, is pithily described by Debray, who pits his own mediological approach against it (touting a supposedly non-normative, nonjudgemental account of mediation), as follows:

for roughly a century, the views of men of culture, faced with '*la' technique*, seem to have wavered between two opposing myths, Faust and Prometheus, and two pathetic tones: catastrophe or redemption. Apocalypse or parousia. The bogeyman has taken up residence in Europe and the fairy godmother in America. Pessimism prevails over dumbfoundedness in our clime, despite a certain Jules Verne, and ranges widely, from vengeful fulmination to morose moralism. Technics and Modernity, the accursed couple, sit together in the dock, so as to answer for their crimes before the Court of Spirit. We won't go into the details of these lofty diatribes we all know and love. Against mechanical civilization, industrial society, Americanization of life, massification of the individual, mass culture, homogenization of society, the one-dimensional man, the consumer society, mass production, the totalitarian Technostructure, 'the aristocrats of Technoscience', etc. (1991: 70).

Of course, as Debray goes on to clarify, such an attitude is common in mid-century philosophical thought of varied political persuasions (e.g. on the right, the Heideggerian conception of *technē* as an enframing of nature set against *poiēsis*; on the left, the Frankfurt School's denunciation of the culture industry), responding to the technocratic, managerialist fantasies of the post-war period, but it is Ellul, he argues, who gives this strain of thought 'its backdrop and real eschatological depths' (1991: 70).[6]

It is unsurprising that the title of Sadin's *L'Intelligence artificielle ou l'enjeu du* siècle (2018) makes an allusion to Ellul's foundational work *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (1954; translated into English as *The Technological Society*, 1964), for whilst Sadin's writings deal with the specificities of contemporary digital culture, the basic framework through which he evaluates the effects of this culture – and the 'wager' (*l'enjeu*) it entails – relies principally upon the notion of *la technique* developed in Ellul's writings. At the risk of simplification, this term (which is not as easily translatable into English as it might seem at first glance[7]) is used by Ellul to describe an all-embracing, self-augmenting logic, forming a monistic unity that presents the same characteristics everywhere, dominating all aspects of our lives; an ideal of thoroughgoing mechanization to which everything and everyone is expected to conform; an inhuman ideal, compelling human beings to live under less-than-human conditions, rendering human relationships impersonal and transactional and taking humans out of the loop as much as possible; autonomous and self-directing, requiring no external guidance, and instrumental, prioritizing means over ends, the latter having being predetermined; premised upon mathematical measurement and calculation, enabling supposedly rational determination of the most efficient method for achieving these predetermined outcomes; an elimination or transmutation of all spontaneous, irrational, or unsystematic activities; a logic that positions itself beyond good and evil, detached from all traditional morality, and above politics, granting power to an elite cadre of technicians and engineers.

Despite the panoply of thinkers to whom he refers, Sadin's conceptualization of an algorithmic technological complex, involving the rationalization, automation, and integration of all spheres of human activity under the aegis of an inhuman logic, taking on 'the unprecedented responsibility of governing beings and things at a larger scale, more rapidly and "rationally"' (2013: 24), is strikingly similar to that described above. We can clearly make out the rudiments of Sadin's argument in the following observation from Ellul's *The Technological System*:

we are ready to make the universe invented by the computer into reality, a universe that is encoded [*chiffré*], synthetic, all-encompassing, and indisputable all at once. We are no longer capable of putting it into perspective: the view it gives us of the world we are in seems more true to us than the reality we live in. There, at least, we hold something indisputable, refusing to see its purely fictive and figurative character […] And how can we prove the computer wrong? For even if we point out one of these risible errors, it does not challenge the overall fact that the encoded universe of the computer is gradually becoming the universe taken to be the reality into which we are integrated' (1980 [1977]: 104–105, translation altered).

More than anything else, however, what links Sadin and Ellul – and, as a corollary, distances them from other early philosophers of technology grouped under the 'technocritique' label, like Lewis Mumford (1934), Siegfried Giedion (1948), or Ivan Illich (1973) – is a shared sense of spiritual alienation in the face of technological omnipotence. For Ellul, 'the invasion of technique desacralizes the world in which man [*sic*] is called upon to live', for in the technical orientation 'nothing is sacred, there is no mystery, no taboo' (1964: 142). Technique, according to his account, respects no barriers, no limits to its rationalizing action, it takes no heed of the secrets central to human cultures, and instead ceaselessly pushes forward, shedding light on everything, abiding only by its own rules and norms. And yet, precisely because 'man cannot live without the sacred', he ends up transferring 'his sense of the sacred to the very thing which has destroyed its former object: to technique itself' (143).

Whilst Sadin's work is entirely lacking in Ellul's religious inclinations (the latter's idiosyncratic Protestantism being central to his sociology of technology as well as his more straightforwardly theological writings), he clearly sees something sacrilegious in the 'anthropomorphic conformation' these systems have taken on, which, going far beyond the merely functional role of the interface, 'grants them the status of caring "beings", like a loving mother or a guardian angel, with a view to meeting our needs, wishes, and comfort, and substitutes the principle of communication, necessarily presupposing utilitarian objectives, for that of *communion*' (2018: 72–73).[8] Chatbots, smart speakers, digital assistants, and other such devices and platforms, with their seemingly incomparable knowledge, ungrudgingly bestowing upon us their expertise and good advice, have insinuated themselves into the field of human sociality, and as a result, Sadin argues,

> there is nothing standing in the way of *alētheic* technologies being no longer seen as artefactual entities born of our will and our knowledge, and instead as agents living their own lives, integrating themselves naturally and gracefully into our domestic, urban, and professional milieux. All the conditions are in place for us to make ourselves as open to them as possible, by the fact of their ever-expanding power, the trust we place in them, and the increasingly relaxed relationship we keep with them (2018: 76).

This regime of truth is thus particularly insidious first of all because it gradually foists itself upon us by taking on a humanlike guise, garnering a misplaced confidence in its truth-telling aptitude, but then also because this delusive guise, in a vicious circle, highlights our own cognitive limitations and vulnerabilities and encourages us to attempt to transcend our connate finitude. It galls Sadin that 'Siliconian philosophy', the animating spirit of Silicon Valley, views the human being's natural boundaries, 'its cognitive finitude, its beliefs, its hesitations, its doubts, its errors of judgement' (2016: 93) as shortcomings that need to be addressed rather than positive attributes constitutive of subjectivity and autonomy. Human beings profane themselves as they yearn to augment themselves, under the false impression this finitude constitutes a weakness for which they must compensate.

Such claims echo those of Günther Anders, another key early technocritic, and his notion of 'Promethean shame', whereby humans, frustrated by the enormity of what they have created, come to 'acknowledge the superiority of things, bring themselves into line with them, and *welcome their own reification*' (2016 [1956]: 35). As Sadin would have it, however, this supposed frustration has nowadays been supplanted by a 'faith in an eminently reassuring and intensifying power of existence': our augmentation by and delegation of decision-making to machines is motivated not by discomfiture or dispossession but by a conviction in the possibility of an 'endless increase in the quality of life' (2013: 73) for humans enabled by the immaterial agents of Silicon Valley – and with it, a failure to recognize the anti-human ideals that motivate their design.

Indeed, the benefits of automation and artificial intelligence, as Nandita Biswas Mellamphy notes, are often justified within a distinctly anthropocentric framework, 'viewed in terms of human autonomy and oversight over non-humans' and 'portrayed as judicious human interventions navigating the contingencies of unpredictable change' (2023: 5), with scientific self-regulation posited as the means by which this technology's risks might be contained and its capabilities harnessed in order to serve human ends – hence the numerous 'post-humanist' currents of thought in recent years that have variously attempted to decentre the figure of the human.[9] Regardless of how successful such attempts have been, it is important for us to note that Sadin's concern here is not anthropocentrism but anthropomorphism: the obscenity or profanity of the notion that humans might try to fabricate artificial versions of themselves. In fact, his account, as we shall see, is profoundly anthropocentric, defending 'the historical tradition of the mastery and full lucidity of human action' (2015: 126) in the face of an automated administration of human affairs.

A new humanism

Sadin is not a metaphysical determinist in the Hobbesian mould; on the contrary, he is fully invested in humanity's freedom to determine its own fate. But he worries that in voluntarily giving up our agency to said machines, we are 'living through the ongoing actualization of an equivalence between our world and a perfectly tuned piece of machinery' analogous to that described by Hobbes in the seventeenth century, 'a political and social clockwork in which each component would be connected to all the others, working in concert in order to ensure smooth functioning' (2018: 138–139). Artificial intelligence is not just a computational method, for it involves 'the institutionalization of a mode of organizing common affairs', but whereas the Hobbesian conception of social organization (a formative instance of what would come to be called the 'social contract') involves the voluntary cession of the monopoly of violence in order to avoid the war of all against all and thus secure the viability of human activities, the mode of organization offered by this regime of truth, which demands we cede our monopoly over rationality, has only 'profitable and utilitarian aims' (2018: 141), even whilst promising an ongoing improvement in all things. We find ourselves disempowered, 'caught, in the name of greater efficiency, in the meshes of a modern-day – algorithmic – Leviathan' (2018: 142), formalized in mechanisms to which a unilateral decision-making power has been granted without our consent and without any ability on our part to intervene or oppose them. It is thus imperative, Sadin suggests, to refuse such a cession and instead valorize 'modes of rationality grounded in an acceptance of the plurality of beings and the fundamental uncertainty of life' (2018: 30), irreducible to such cynical ends.

Sadin forcefully defends a positive conception of the human being, pitted against the 'technological nihilism or radical anti-humanism' (2016: 30) imposed upon us by Silicon Valley. In the Anglosphere, this kind of argument tends to be confined to the theoretical humanities and social sciences. And even then, in these fields, which still bear the imprint of phenomenology, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and structuralism, as well as by various feminist, postcolonial/decolonial, and new materialist currents of thought and are still in the main deeply suspicious of the legacy of the Enlightenment, 'humanism' – which usually refers to an abstract, unified, and universal conception of the human subject and an accompanying conception of this subject as autonomous and sovereign, author of their own destiny and exercising a certain mastery over external nature – remains a perennial adversary.[10] It has become almost habitual, argues Elsa Dorlin, for such scholars to 'track down anything that might bear even the slightest resemblance to a return to "humanism", "universalism", or "essentialism"' (2009: 18), lest they themselves be accused of the same. In France, by contrast, a forthright humanism has long been the rallying cry of a certain brand of public

intellectual – the likes of André Glucksmann and Bernard-Henri Lévy, the latter of whom insists upon the need to fight for 'the philosophy of right, the metaphysics of man, and the politics of human rights which, at the end of this century, we still so desperately lack', averring that the only way to fight fascism is to 'abolish all places, forget all times, scorn all circumstances – and to posit, whatever the cost, that there are values which are at once eternal, universal, and categorial' (1981: l 267). Despite his strident critique of modern forms of liberalism, it is hard not to resist the temptation to lump Sadin in with these intellectuals, the self-styled *nouveaux philosophes* who, in the words of Isabelle Garo, 'bring together academic philosophy's drawn-out turns of phrase with the virulence of moralizing denunciation' (2011: 69).

Like most humanisms, anti-humanisms, and post-humanisms alike, the ceaseless conflict between which has become a perennial feature of theoretical and philosophical debate (e.g. between Heideggerian ontology and Sartrean existentialism, between said existentialism and post-Saussurean structuralism, between Raymond Williams' humanist Marxism and Stuart Hall's Althusserian humanism, as well as in the briefly fashionable 'speculative turn', etc.), Sadin's account of human existence, although repeatedly invoked, is somewhat vague in its definition. He worries about the disappearance of 'the modern subject, stemming from a humanist tradition which instituted the individual as a singular and free being, *fully aware* of and responsible for their actions' (2013: 32). He laments the fact that European humanism, which 'exhibited a thirst for individual and collective emancipation' during the Enlightenment, lost its way, failing to recognize 'the subtle but crucial distinction between the infinite power of the human mind and our natural propensity to want to free ourselves from all limits' (2016: 270), ending up in exploitation and ecological catastrophe. But he also refuses to renounce 'the beautiful momentum driving this humanism', insisting that we must instead take up its inspiration once again, 'which intended to promote the autonomy of beings and the free expression of their capacities', fighting against 'fatalism, egotism, and cynicism' and instead promoting 'a celebration of our inventive power […] founded upon every person's singular disposition to enrich the common good', upholding 'respect for human integrity and dignity, but also for the diversity of our environment' (2016: 271). He seeks to vindicate a humanism which 'enjoins us to cultivate our capacities, which alone can truly make us masters of our destinies, to promote the blossoming of an endless number of possibilities, without encroaching upon any person's rights, giving voice to the polyphonic and uninterrupted song of divergences' (2018: 272).

In an argument that again invites comparison with Heidegger, who views technical civilization as eradicating other possibilities of revealing (*alētheia*), including the possibility of revealing as such, denying humanity the prospect of accessing 'a more primal truth' (2008 [1954]: 233), Sadin is also harrowed by the prospect of *the real* as such disappearing. The eradication of sensible experience, he asserts, represents one of the major objectives of the Siliconian philosophy, destroying its 'infinite richness' so as to 'keep our relation to the real within the confines of a limited number of modalities' (2016: 257). The result is a new mode of perception in which 'experience is disfigured, reduced to a single dimension, apprehending the real only through the prism of pixels' (2016: 258). For him 'the real' – which encompasses all those aesthetic, affective, or ambivalent aspects of human life that cannot be contained within algorithmic technologies' narrow *alētheic* strictures – 'must be defended, for it conditions the possibility of experiencing without restraint the virtually infinite scale of our faculties, of perfecting them and recognizing ourselves as singular beings evolving within a common whole' (2018: 225). He is convinced all human beings possess a natural autonomy in both judgement and sensibility: a rational capacity to exercise our free choice combined with an inexhaustible creative potential. He is accordingly castigatory of any authority that would constrain our 'natural right to use our subjectivity' (2016: 110).

In simple terms then, Sadin's humanism is premised upon a universal affirmation of freedom, individuality, conviviality, and responsibility, combined with a declared need to harness our innate creative faculties and embodied relation to the real, exploring the full range of possibilities at our disposal, all the while ensuring that we do not harm or take advantage of others (or the planet). All of which is, in his view, incompatible with the robotized, data-driven society, which is 'founded on the techno-ideological postulate of a fundamental human deficiency for which the ceaselessly varying and expanding powers assigned to artificial intelligence will be able to make up', the latter taking on an unprecedented political power, assuming the role of a '*superego* endowed at all times with an intuition for truth, guiding the course of our individual and collective actions for the best of worlds' (2016: 29–30) – making a pretence of possessing the kind of absolute knowledge once regarded as the privileged domain of God alone.

In the face of this putatively omniscient administration, we must acknowledge our uniquely human finitude, accepting that the real will always exceed our attempts to contain it, and thus embracing the uncertainty and responsibility that accompanies the free exercise, both individually and collectively, of our faculties of judgement and decision. To instead attempt to counter this finitude would thus be to rob us of our humanity:

> the 'death of Man' invoked by [Michel] Foucault is no longer brought about by the exhaustion of the human sciences vainly plumbing his depths, but is confirmed or revived in a different way half a century later by the generation of systems, of human origin, dedicated to increasing his capacities, which in return paradoxically decompose his plurisecular supremacy' (2013: 154).

But whereas Foucault (1970 [1966]) is happily willing to place a bet on the death of so-called 'man' as a peculiar, ambivalent, and historically contingent figuration of finitude, Sadin mourns the loss of the seeming surety this figure offered. The longstanding conception of humanity understood as 'a singular, transhistorical, evolving whole, *a priori* free to pursue its own destiny' is breaking down, eclipsed by 'the emergence of an organico-synthetic compound; ultimately rejecting any absolutely sovereign and autonomous dimension' (2014: 154). Technological progress is no longer about augmenting human beings' own capacities, but about exceeding their natural and insurmountable limits, working at scales and paces they cannot comprehend. This means the deployment of these *dispositifs* will always pose a threat to the full flourishing of human aspirations, insofar as they wrest the direction of the latter from humanity's own hands. And yet, at the same time, the inability on their part to deal with the human factor also presents opportunities for the latter, since 'they neither evolve at the same pace nor pursue the same objectives in every circumstance', producing a continual discordance 'liable to make the machine creak' (2018: 142).

The limitations of technocritique

From Sadin's perspective, algorithmic culture's ongoing encroachment upon everyday life offers the opportunity for a renewed, ethically grounded humanism, based upon a loosely envisaged conception of natural right. 'At the moment when digital protocols are exerting unprecedented power and pressure on the way we live,' he declares, 'everything hinges on measuring them against the yardstick of ethical exigencies' (2015: 247). He specifically looks toward an ethical rather than a moral grounding for this humanism, based on the premise that 'ethics does not seek to evaluate the whole domain of life according to established categories that vary on the basis of historical traditions, cultural and religious affiliations, and ideologies' and instead 'considers the human being to possess certain fundamental aspects inalienable from and consubstantial with their wellbeing, which must be safeguarded, maintained, and developed whatever the circumstances and

developments' (2015: 247). He identifies three crucial ethical tasks to be pursued: a) protecting fundamental values (e.g. individual freedom, privacy, prevention of harm to others, and the imperative to not instrumentalize others) in the face of the upheavals described; b) providing the most auspicious conditions for individual and collective fulfilment; and c) defending public space and the commons from arrogation by private interests. And above all else, 'affirming, at a time of the algorithmic management of all fields of life, the human capacity to act', not allowing ourselves to be swayed by the 'immense power of systems' (2015: 250–251) designed to serve the interests of a Silicon Valley elite.

Sadin's appeal to a transhistorical and transcultural conception of human wellbeing, valid at all times and in all places, and more broadly, to 'the founding principles of European humanism – affirming autonomy of judgement and free choice, with their corollary, the principle of responsibility and the right of societies to decide upon their destiny in common' (2016: 30), clearly inspired by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, with its affirmations of equality, liberty, and popular sovereignty, actually tempers the impact of his critique. Precisely because such an ideal cannot be achieved, any technology, institution, or policy can be posited as an obstacle to the human being's full flourishing, belying his habitual assertion that today's artificial intelligence and computational governance represent an unprecedented state of affairs. The actual affordances and drawbacks of the technologies under examination are of little significance, merely serving as examples of humanity's current enchainment. In his palpable disdain for anything technical, mechanical, or instrumental, Sadin rehearses the metaphysical drama of the autonomous human being pitted against civilizational constraints (as we see, for instance, in the Rousseauian narrative tying progress in the arts and sciences to the corruption of humanity) – the kind of narrative which views history, as Debray once put it, as 'the trek of a sovereign subject, self-consistent through all his fragmentations and sooner or later returning to himself after the trials and tribulations the adversity of time makes him suffer' (1991: 74).[11] Such a narrative fails to confront the conjuncture head on, seeking refuge in the promise of an inalienable human agency and mastery that is nevertheless always alienated and thus never actually realized.

Technocritique will always be susceptible to the complaint levelled against those who furnish non-empirical accounts of technology: namely, that they, in Daniel Bougnoux's words, 'throw words out there about a group of disparate phenomena, making them into a Satan or scapegoat without descending to the realm of social uses' (1993: 536) – an aspersion typically more reflective of academic positioning and posturing than any inherent flaw in an author's work.[12] At the same time though, it is hard to deny that, as Thibault Le Texier observes, Sadin tends to be 'more declamatory than argumentative', his books often resembling 'a science-fiction essay made from essentially non-scientific materials more than a rigorous analysis of observable phenomena' (2014–2015: 81). In particular, given his disdain for big tech's rhetoric, it is remarkable how willing Sadin is to take the hyperbolic proclamations of this industry's entrepreneurs and engineers at face value. In keeping with Ellul's conception of *la technique*, Sadin leans heavily on the notion that Silicon Valley and its conduits are working to foist a single hegemonic logic or principle (under the aegis of the aforementioned *alētheic power*) upon society, which will eventually override the plurality of contradictory trends and movements constitutive of liberal democracy. The necessary dissensus of the general will, insofar as it is premised upon the right to free participation and deliberation, is, according to this perspective, gradually being replaced by an automated administration of behaviours and attitudes.

The problem, of course, is that this narrative ignores the often cynical, competing drives behind so-called innovation in digital technologies, the profit motives and monopolistic tendencies of the latter making it hard to see it as plausibly expressing a 'universal technical principle', let alone aspiring to 'faultless management of almost all sectors of society' (2018: 15). Can we really

point toward an 'implacable alliance between industrial and economic powers, political leaders, a large swathe of the academic and scientific world, and all kinds of interest groups' working toward 'the rapid eradication of the principles upon which we are founded' (2018: 31)? And this is before we even pose the question of exactly who the 'we' is here. Such claims imply a unity of purpose that cannot be squared with the aleatory developments that have determined our conjuncture. The severity of Sadin's critique leads to it falling largely into alignment with Silicon Valley's own disingenuous rhetoric.

Moreover, Sadin has a predilection for identifying both specific moments in history from which the oppressive features of computational governance spring and tipping points at which these features become appreciable, but these moments continue to multiply over the course of his writings, leading one to question exactly how decisive they are. So many origins and ruptures are identified, the effect becomes jarring. We 'probably do not fully grasp,' he asserts, 'just how historically exceptional our present time is' (2013: 32). Yet phrases like 'for the first time in history' or 'never before in history' appear with such frequency, in reference to such a diversity of historical phenomena, it becomes difficult to identify exactly what is distinct about this present time. This latter point is important, precisely because there is, on the surface, a strong historical character to Sadin's writing: he admirably seeks to contextualize such a society, situating it within a broader history of technological, political, and economic shifts over the past century. The problem is, history for Sadin acts as just a storehouse of quotations and anecdotes: illustrations of infallible wisdom and inexcusable folly, all indexed against an unattainable benchmark of human autonomy, agency, and mastery, grounded in humanity's inherent faculties.

The surety with which he postulates this latter benchmark distinguishes Sadin's version of technocritique from Ellul's, the latter of whom affirms that 'we do not understand very well what man is, and nothing we know would justify us in declaring his character sacred or some part of it inalienable and purely personal or in asserting that he has supreme value' (1964: 392), noting that whilst these values may well exist within 'him', they always elude our attempts to locate them. But Sadin, as a polemicist who strives to guide his audience away from reliance upon computational technologies, needs to sustain some hope in the face of what he posits as an integral system that encroaches upon all facets of individual and collective life. The ideal of a self-sufficient human being, free of all determination and in full possession of their natural faculties, figured as the obverse of the alienated, augmented being fully integrated into this system of algorithmic administration, becomes the rhetorical means of such sustenance, gesturing toward a latent potentiality we all have within us, if only we could muster the strength to exercise it. After all, he argues, 'never in history has a movement that scorns human freedom developed in perpetuity without some day being blown back by headwinds' (2018: 261). But one could hardly be blamed for inferring from all this that it is the technocritic themselves who is being posited as the embodiment of this ideal, immune in some fashion to the deleterious effects of these technologies even whilst they navigate a world filled with them.

Accounting for media

Sadin's books are not aimed solely at an academic audience, though they certainly have had influence in this domain, and do not straightforwardly fall into the usual tropes of academic 'critique'. In fact, he is just as castigatory of the utopian spirit of so much critical theory as he is of that spruiked by Silicon Valley evangelists:

> at a moment when technoliberal messianic utopianism has won the battle of ideas and is already producing its dreadful effects on our lives, it is not by building another utopia that we will give ourselves the means of

opposing it; rather, it is far more *by proceeding methodically*, deciding upon a plural and open register of actions to be exercised on the ground, where things take place, where abuses are committed, where indignities take place every day (2018: 252).

He remains steadfast in his confidence that the 'anti-humanist assault' on our autonomy can be defeated 'by a multitude of concrete, sustained, and cumulative acts' (2018: 261), numerous instances of which are enumerated across said books. These acts, almost without fail, amount to acts of refusal (in various spheres: work, education, law, etc.) outside the realm of representative politics, establishing limits that respect human finitude and bringing forms of life to fruition that are not dependent on the hegemonic logics of computation. Performed singularly or collectively, these acts demonstrate that our capacity to act autonomously still persists.

The question is, though: given the lofty ideals to which Sadin aspires (i.e. full autonomy, agency, mastery, etc.), could any of these acts actually assuage his fears and rectify his complaints? In the fetters of 'a universal epistemological and anthropological condition' (2015: 130) like that he describes, how can a genuine act of human freedom be distinguished from one that is merely allowed within the parameters of the technical system he so despises? The result of this ambiguity is that his humanism can only take the form of an asceticism, exhorting us to ceaselessly purify ourselves of the technical adulterants in our lives in pursuit of ideals that we will perpetually fail to realize. In fact, this is precisely how he describes his own work, intended 'as a tool enabling one, in the exquisite sensation of touching printed pages, sheltered from the hubbub of the world, to better determine oneself, conscientiously and responsibly' (2018: 36). In this way, Sadin exhibits yet another manifestation of the tactical but ultimately futile retreat that has become endemic in the theoretical humanities in the face of the (genuinely alarming) threat posed by digitization and now generative artificial intelligence, seeking refuge in an ever-receding sphere of the incomputable. The opprobrium Sadin aims at the anthropomorphism of so many artificial intelligence systems is a symptom of this tactic, for these systems' intrusion into the service and care industries, as well as other forms of affective, emotional, and creative labour, may well put paid to the notion that any sphere of human existence is *a priori* immune to automation.

'Theoretical detachment and reflexive thinking,' Sadin argues, 'are distinguished by the fact that they are not subject to the primarily functionalist logics fostered by digitality' (2015: 245). If only this were truly the case! The notion that critical thought is somehow immune to automation, calculation, mechanism, mimesis, technique, and so on has a long history (we already see it, at the turn of the nineteenth century in the writings of the German Idealists and Jena Romantics), yet it offers an unconvincing defence of the humanities, fixing its diverse fields of study to an ideal that disregards (or abstracts from) the material, technical, and historical contexts in which they are cultivated and the instrumentalities they serve, treating critical thought as if it were the natural result of some innate human faculty. Sadin's asceticism, justified by the truistic maxim that 'imposing prohibitions is the necessary condition for any viable individual and collective existence' (2016: 265), provides much grist for his polemical, technocritical mill. But the presupposition of a basic human self-determination – an innate integrity and dignity which computational technologies have desecrated and which only a theoretical reason purportedly purged of all technical and instrumental ends can restore – makes it exceedingly difficult to discuss the ways these technologies are implicated in the types of refusal for which he advocates. In particular, it occludes the complex channels, intersections, and negotiations by which these acts of refusal become more than just heroic individual gestures. As David Forest observes, even though Sadin has little positive to say about libertarianism, his account 'offers no prospect

other than relying on all those concerned to conduct their own affairs' and in doing so 'unwittingly leads us back to the anti-political discourse of big tech' (2019: 192).

Some might argue Sadin is too pessimistic in his evaluation of the effects of this new algorithmic regime of truth he decries. As in the case of any technological invention, there are those scholars who take the sensible middle ground, suspending judgement on its potential ramifications. Grégory Chatonsky and Yves Citton, for instance, assure us that there are pleasures in 'the infinite play of simulacra and similarities' produced by generative artificial intelligence tools that 'neither the technocritical pastors nor humanist priests will ever understand' (2024: 193). This, to be clear, is not my stance: Sadin's pessimism, I would contend, is largely borne out by our present conjuncture, even if I sometimes disagree with his specific diagnoses and analyses. And for whatever rhetorical overreach his work might display, he commendably and consistently stresses the importance of concrete, sustained, and cumulative acts of refusal, comparable less to the fleeting moments of tactical or semiotic 'resistance' once incessantly talked up by English-language media, communication, and cultural studies and more to the struggles of the industrial-age Luddites or the Marcusean 'great refusal' to which he sometimes refers. My objection is more narrow: namely, that his veneration of 'our indomitable singularity', the joyful experience of 'fully existing in all the power of our being' (2016: 261), cannot account for the *media* (or *milieu*, *mediation*, *means*, *mechanisms*, or whichever term we might prefer) by which this power is acquired and effected – put simply, that which comes in-between.

Conclusion

'Each age recreates a humanism that is to a certain extent always appropriate to its circumstances,' argues Gilbert Simondon, 'because it takes aim at the most severe aspect of alienation that a civilization contains or produces' (2017 [1958]: 118). In an academic context, this is one of the most interesting aspects of Sadin's work: namely, the way in which he rationalizes his reassertion of human exceptionalism as symptomatic of the narcissistic wound algorithmic systems and machine learning tools have inflicted (analogous to the way the Renaissance Humanists promoted their curriculum in opposition to the supposedly rigid dogmatism of the mediaeval schoolmen or the Romantics exhorted aesthetic cultivation as a panacea for the fragmentation and alienation of modern society) – in other words, the way in which he implicitly reworks the notion of Promethean shame, at the same time he casts doubt on its existence, not in order to beat the drum for untrammelled technological development but to justify the technocritic's self-styling as the autonomous human being *par excellence*.

After all, the kind of humanism promoted both by Simondon and, more than half a century later, by Sadin already treats the alienation of human reality as a given, taking it for granted that so-called 'man' will, in the face of technological development, be robbed of his freedom (and with it, his putative wholeness) and thus that there is an ongoing need for him to problematize himself and his world in order to try and regain it.[13] Such presuppositions are a recurring feature not just of theoretical and philosophical humanisms but also, as counter-intuitive as it might seem, to many anti-humanisms as well, which, *mutatis mutandis*, tend to preserve this ethical injunction to self-problematization (decentring, deconstructing, multiplying, overcoming, etc.), exhorting us to break away from the illusion of a self-present and self-sufficient human subjectivity, suturing the false, alienating division between subject and object. The result is an interminable toing and froing which tells us little about the nature of the human being but much about the intellectual exercises prescribed in the name of attenuating such alienation.

Sadin's books can be considered notable instances, both evocative and instructive, in a longer history of such prescriptions – more specifically, of those that pit human autonomy against heteronomous technologies, techniques, and administration. It is crucial to remember though that

Sadin's principal enemy is not theoretical or philosophical anti-humanism; rather, it is the 'Siliconian' anti-humanism implemented by big tech companies. Sadin is not incorrect when he declares an urgent need 'to get back in touch with the humanities, in the classical sense of the term', by which he means 'knowledge of the foundational texts, able to help us understand the predominant role "precedent", to use Ivan Illich's term, plays in constituting our culture, and encourage education in critical thinking' (2015: 250).[14] But such knowledge is not an end in itself – we need to actually learn something from this precedent. If we sympathize with Sadin's enmity toward Siliconian anti-humanism, the way to counter it is surely not to join in with this toing and froing. To figure the human being in the way Sadin does, indexing their putative wholeness to the chimerical ideal of freedom and autonomy, is to efface the *practices* by which those in the humanities (otherwise known as *les lettres*, *les sciences humaines*, *Geisteswissenschaften*, etc.) cultivate and maintain the faculties he claims are innate. Such effacement is not uncommon in the theoretical humanities. But it is a particular problem at a time of increasingly ubiquitous algorithmic decision-making and generative artificial intelligence (which Sadin addresses directly in his more recent books, especially 2023's *La vie spectrale: penser l'ère du métavers et des IA génératives*), because in positing an innate facet of human nature ontologically shielded from digital automation, we risk failing to address *why* certain activities should not be automated.

We should of course, as Sadin suggests, 'challenge the pedagogical norms that, from the post-war period onward, have continued to denigrate the humanities' (2018: 270). But we should also use this as an opportunity to rethink exactly why we value the humanities, not taking for granted what humanistic research comprises or assuming it must coincide with the post-Kantian equation of instrumentality and heteronomy. We need to spend less time asserting that the humanities can assist in the full flourishing of the human being (or 'man', as this figure was once referred), revitalizing and exploiting their natural faculties, and more time expounding upon the specific kinds of knowledge the humanities furnish, the social good that stems from the cultivation of a humanistic ethos, and the value of engaging in the techniques and procedures of humanistic research (rather than treating these as incidental means to a higher end). Above all else, this means not treating critical thinking as a panacea for all our technological afflictions that will enable us to resist alienation and elude determination. Otherwise, in a peculiar way and to our own detriment, we end up, like artificial intelligence systems themselves, black-boxing the means by which concrete goals can be reached.

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Notes

1. All translations from French-language texts are my own, unless otherwise noted in the bibliography.
2. The only substantive treatment of which I am aware occurs in Mark Hansen's *Feed-Forward* (2015), which examines one of Sadin's earlier books: *La société de l'anticipation* (2011). Whilst Sadin's work is seldom discussed in Anglophone scholarship, it has found much greater success in the Hispanosphere, with a number of his books having been translated into Spanish and heavily cited in this language.
3. Direct references to Heidegger are surprisingly rare in Sadin's books, given his use of this terminology (and especially his description of *alētheia* as *dévoilement*, which is an unmistakeable allusion to the Heideggerian notion of *unverborgenheit*).
4. In its focus on the techniques and institutions of cultural transmission, 'mediology' can be roughly compared to the work of North American theorists like Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and James Carey or German theorists like Friedrich Kittler.

5. The notion of '*technocritique*' was popularized in France in 1975 by the engineer and philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy, who used it as the name for a book series he edited, published by Seuil. François Jarrige provides a detailed explication of this concept in his book *Technocritiques* (2016) and expounds upon its applicability to Ellul specifically in his article 'Jacques Ellul technocritique' (2020).

6. All these critiques were at least partly a response to a technocratic worldview which, writes Armand Mattelart, 'adopted as self-evident a combative discourse about society, oriented by the primacy of science and artificial intelligence and based on the announced "end" of ideology, politics, class struggle, intellectual protest and hence political involvement' (2010 [2007], 55).

7. The term '*la technique*' can be rendered in English as 'technique', 'technics', 'the technical', or 'technology' (referring to specific devices or apparatuses, with the term *la technologie* often reserved for discourse apropos of the former).

8. It is worth pointing out that Sadin's description of this care function in maternal terms may well be overly generous; in many cases, it is more redolent of a domestic servant, which, as Thao Phan contends, 'speaks more to the historic dehumanization of working-class men and women of color than to the contemporary anthropomorphism of these digital assistants' (2019, 29).

9. To speak of the post-human, suggests N. Katherine Hayles, does not mean to speak of the end of humankind; rather, it signals 'the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings' (1999, 296).

10. To take two relatively recent examples related to Sadin's areas of interest, Joanna Zylinska looks toward 'a more entangled and less antagonistic model of envisaging future AI systems', which 'would not pitch the human against the machine' (2020, 66) and Jill Walker Rettberg advocates a posthumanism which 'emphasises relationships and mutual interconnection instead of the binary opposition between an active subject and a passive object' (2023, 11).

11. In fairness to Sadin, he does, in an earlier book, expressly disparage the 'naivety' of these kinds of accounts (which he associates with Plato, Rousseau, Heidegger, and Debord), which 'always appeal to "the human", established as an autonomous metaphysical concept, who should have remained sheltered from history's corruptions and whose fantastical fundamental and invariable core must be recovered' (2009, 101). It is nevertheless still the case that his later books make this very same appeal.

12. In English-language media studies, such aspersions are often connected to the dreaded epithet of 'determinism' (see Peters 2017). As Thierry Bardini notes, scholars like Bougnoux, associated with the school of mediology, tend to follow the McLuhanian example in appealing to a circular, retroactive, non-linear, or recursive model of causality, which enables them 'to challenge accusations of "technological determinism", claiming on the contrary a logic of the co-constitution or co-production of society (or social relations) and technics' (2016, 163).

13. In Simondon's case, 'man frees himself from his situation of being enslaved by the finality of the whole, by learning how to create finality, by learning how to organize a finalized whole that he judges and appreciates' (2017 [1958]), 119) – a task he sees cybernetics as facilitating in his time.

14. Sadin is alluding to this observation made by Illich (a theologian like Ellul, albeit a Roman Catholic one) in *Tools for Conviviality*, another frequently included title in the technocritical corpus: 'society can be destroyed […] when cancerous acceleration enforces social change at a rate that rules out legal, cultural, and political precedents as formal guidelines to present behaviour' (1973, 11).

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