

Reflections on “The Machine Has No Tradition”: An Intensive Summer Seminar at the Abigail Adams Institute

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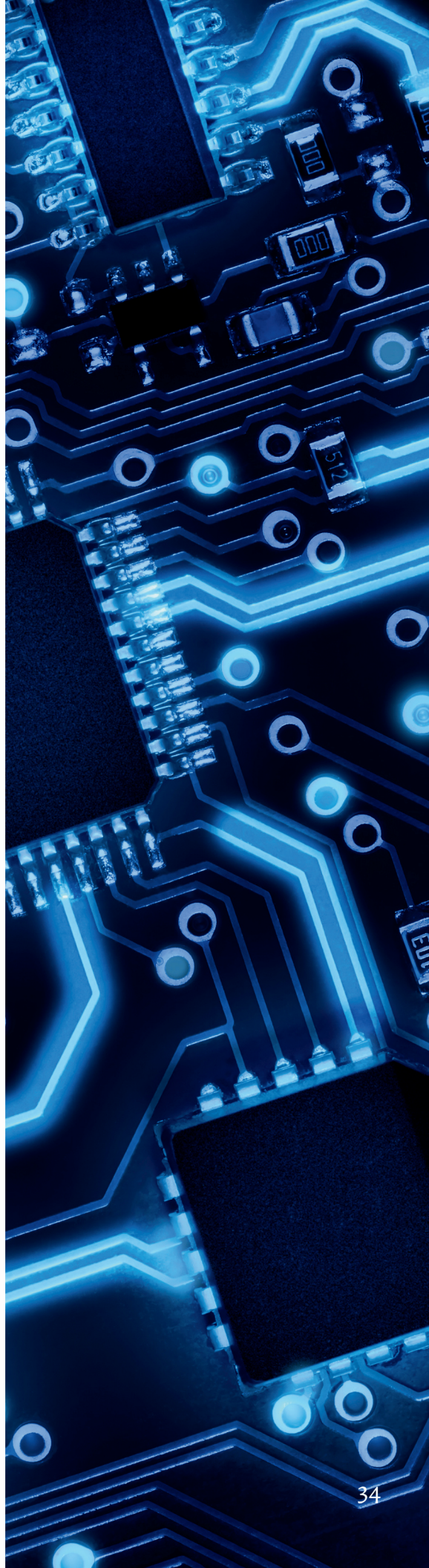
The distinctive feature of life today is that our lives appear to be technologically liberated from nature. We live in human-made physical, social and virtual environments. The human condition is unbundled, disrupted, and made optional, even as supposed human distinctives like speech, creation, and rationality are automated, simulated, and replicated.

The specter of technology raises afresh the question: what is a human being, and what does it take to stay one? In an immersive weeklong seminar, the students at the Abigail Adams Institute grappled with the essence of technology and life in a technological society. We explored how technology is reshaping our souls and our society and what a humanistic approach to technology might look like. We engaged with the best that has been said and thought about technology, while also hearing from both technology creators and practitioners of endangered human traditions.

The seminar further balanced a focus on the increasing technological mediation of human consciousness on the one hand, and the shifting material foundations of social life on the other. We looked closely into the transformation of economy, psychology, politics, gender, religion and culture: in short, the transformation of humanity.

As a pupil as well as lecturer in the seminar, my main goal was to understand the roots of our technopolitical order and to demystify the seeming complexities of our social and economic life under this dispensation. Especially intriguing and salient was the question of technology and capitalism, and trying to disentangle which features belong to one or the other, and what difference that might make to how we can live better today.

We also explored alternative technopolitical arrangements in the twentieth century, like corporatism and fascism, and interrogated their answers to the big questions. The applied portion of the seminar asked the participants to engineer humanistic solutions to some problematic aspect of our world that was brought about by some gains in efficiency. The seminar, therefore, looked to both top-down and bottom-up approaches to addressing and possibly ameliorating the more dystopic features of modernity.





Gonzalo Cervantes

In today's age, we're often caught up in the now, barely pausing to reflect on how we got here or where we're headed. It seems that in our rush to build the future, we're overlooking the lessons of the past, and sometimes it feels like the future has no connection to tradition. As a father to two young girls, I find myself often pondering what kind of world we're creating for them. My thoughts usually lean towards pessimism unless I'm imagining the exciting possibilities of rockets, spaceships, endless energy, easy access to knowledge, freedom of speech, and general prosperity—then I can't help but feel a spark of optimism.

However, my Catholic faith always brings me back to a more grounded perspective, reminding me of the transcendental nature of our existence and what should matter. This spiritual reflection often tilts me back towards pessimism (earthly wise), not out of despair but because I see a culture that's lost its memory—forgetting both its roots and its reasons. This makes the world a tricky place for those of us trying to save our souls.

"The Machine Has No Tradition" was a seminar that truly opened my eyes. It wasn't just an academic exercise; it felt like a deep dive into how our lives are being shaped by technologies we barely understand. Jon [Askonas], Nathan [Pinkoski], Mary [Harrington], and Danilo [Petranovich] led us through a series of real, tough questions, engaging with ideas from Karl Marx to Marc Andreessen without hesitation. This wasn't just about getting a clearer picture of technology's evolution and meaning but seeing its tangible effects on people I care about and recognizing its unstoppable momentum. This seminar is a great opportunity for anyone caught at the crossroads of technology and society, providing us with questions that challenge the status quo rather than easy answers.

To me, the significance of posing the right questions about technology and its future rests in the potential to enhance our freedom and independence from those who control the narrative. Often, social and technological experiments become entrenched in society either through public policy or through the widespread adoption of "highly successful" technological products. Once these trends are established, opting out can be nearly impossible. I believe that to actively shape the future we want for our children, we must engage more deeply with these technologies and their broader impacts on societal trends.

Approaching technology from a social and philosophical perspective is a great endeavor. It not only fosters a dialogue about technology's role in shaping our world but also inspires young minds to explore the fundamental aspects of our society and technology and its potential trajectory. This deep, thoughtful examination equips us to make informed decisions that are aligned with our principles and the future we envision. If this resonates with you, I highly encourage you to apply for the next version of the seminar.