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### September 23, 2012: What's So Bad About Technology?

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Title: What's So Bad About Technology?

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9/23/2012--In his interview with Der Spiegel in 1966, Martin Heidegger addressed the future. (He was 76 at the time and died ten years later). In the interview, Heidegger maintained what many would call his illiberal stance toward the pillars of bourgeois life: democracy, capitalism and the rule of law. These were not automatically redemptive for him. Here is one thing he said about democracy: "During the past thirty years, it should meanwhile have become clearer that the planetary movement of modern technology is a power whose great role in determining history can hardly be overestimated. A decisive question for me today is how a political system can be assigned to today's technological age at all, and which political system would that be? I have no answer to this question. I am not convinced that it is democracy." Today, many people would say that technology furthers democracy. We see social media, for example, at work in popular movements, such as the Arab Spring. So, what was Heidegger seeing? I just heard Todd Park (I think that was who it was), US Chief Technology Officer, speaking on the Commonwealth Club radio program, about how the opening up of medical data will enable patients to better manage their own healthcare. Patients have the right incentives, he said, and we have to trust them to improve their own lives. Now, liberals love this. But when conservatives say the same thing in terms of privatizing social security or converting Medicare to vouchers, then liberals see the problem. Maybe we are not all capable entrepreneurs. But what if the problem is not whether these policies work or not? What if the problem is thinking of ourselves as entrepreneurs at all? Thomas Friedman puts it well, although he loves it and does not consider it a problem: in a technological future (and present), those people who innovate will get ahead and everyone else will be left behind. Where in all this is any sense of human solidarity? Heidegger may have been seeing that democracy requires a kind of sense of the whole that technology weakens. And this may be true of nature as well as human community. It is telling that when Romney divided the world of who pays income tax, it was not so much heard, as once it would have been, in terms of character—the hard worker versus the lazy moocher (though there is still some of that). That is because, as Friedman says, in technology, hard work is not enough. Romney's remarks were heard in terms of makers and takers. Technology favors the few, the makers, the talented, the quick. It abhors the mediocre, the average, the stick in the mud. But the latter is almost every one of us. The most oppressive system you can imagine is the one in which average is not good enough. And that may be a technological regime.