TECHNOLOGY AND THE TASK OF PLANETARY THOUGHT

Review of Huk, Y. (2024). Machine and Sovereignty: For a Planetary Thinking. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. (341 pages)

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How to cite (APA): de Boer, B. (2025). Technology and the Task of Planetary Thought: Review of Huk, Y. (2024). Machine and Sovereignty: For a Planetary Thinking. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. (341 pages). *Journal of Human-Technology Relations*, *3*(1), pp.1-5. https://doi.org/10.59490/jhtr.2025.3.8596.

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In 1964, Heidegger famously indicated that the completion of cybernetics coincides with the end of philosophy. With the realisation of technology on a planetary scale, philosophy would have run its course. A couple of decades later, the dream of globalization prospered. After the Cold War, the ideal world was imagined as a place without borders, without designated territories, and characterized by global connectivity. As many philosophers and political commentators have noted, this utopian dream has been unmasked as merely a dream, a fantasy. Instead of global connectivity, we see an articulation of borders, a concentration of power among technological elites, and a longing for authoritarianism, clearly marking a renewed difference between "us" and "them." At the same time, the Anthropocene does not care about territorial boundaries and has an effect on humanity at large. History has returned, or, in fact, has never ended. With this return, the task for planetary thinking has also emerged again.

Against this background, Hui's *Machine and Sovereignty* proposes a rethinking of political philosophy in terms of technology. This rethinking marks the final part of Hui's trilogy responding to the process of technological planetarization. The task Hui sets for himself, then, is to engage in *planetary thinking*. This requires a problematization of the project of Modernity. However, instead of unmasking rationality as an essentially Western value or project, by equating all rationality with capital, or by arguing for an intercultural philosophy, he holds that politics and cybernetics can co-exist. As we will see, following Hui in this cosmological task, one must be willing to engage with a level of abstraction and accept that politics is itself a technological phenomenon. We need to suspend, or even overcome, the idea that we need an ethics of individual technologies, or to find a way of effective technological governance. "Technology" is instead primarily framed in terms of Mumford's notion of the megamachine. The question of political philosophy of technology, then, is essentially the question of the cybernetic megamachine.

The main interlocutors in asking the question of the cybernetic megamachine are Hegel and Schmitt. With Hegel, Hui explores whether the cybernetic megamachine can be interpreted in terms of the manifestation of reason, in what sense freedom can be realized within the megamachine, and if freedom and reason can manifest beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. With Schmitt, it is investigated to what extent sovereignty, as the possibility of not being included in the megamachine, is indeed a condition of possibility for politics. Or, in other words, if the cybernetic megamachine is all-encompassing, can we still meaningfully speak of politics and political decision-making in the first place? And does this form of politics still have room for the local, i.e., for diversity?

BEYOND MODERN NATION-STATES

Hui justifies the turn to Hegel by presenting him as a planetary thinker who holds that reason can manifest in a *Weltgeist*. The dialectical unfolding of the spirit can be understood as a theory of individuation that is ultimately organic in nature: the logic of the Spirit is not one of mechanical linear causality, but rather a rational historical becoming that cannot proceed without contingency (p. 30). According to Hui's reading, it is both necessary and possible to think of the *Weltgeist* as being exteriorized. In line with thinkers like Stiegler, he holds that the world's civilization "is the technical retention of the spirit's memory of this world" (p.36). Reason, then, manifests in exteriorization without finding its ultimate realization in a particular technical system. Rather, technical systems are ultimately contingencies, and it is in overcoming specific contingencies that reason manifests its freedom. Why, then, does Hegel's spirit culminate in the nation-state? On Hui's reading, this is because the ongoing process of becoming of the spirit is defended in the nation-state against the arbitrary interests of

individuals and civil society. However, at the same time, these interests represent those contingencies needed for reason to unfold itself. This also explains why multiple nation-states are necessary: this ensures that the particularities of a particular state are not absolutized.

Hui intends to show that the nation-state must, pace Hegel, be thought contingently; it "correspond[s] to a particular moment of externalization (e.g., institutionalization) and internalization of the spirit (e.g., education)" (p.61). States are organic projections in Kapp's sense, but do not necessarily represent the highest form of externalisation. Rather, their rationality manifests only to that degree that it is possible to *resist* mechanization and to *resist* contingency. However, and to simplify Hui's complex analysis of the Hegelian state somewhat, contemporary nation-states are unable to resist mechanization and contingency. Instead, they have become superficial actors who are not governing, but rather mere passive recipients of the logic of global technology and climate change. As such, they are no longer those externalizations in which rationality manifests but have become conditions for unfreedom.

What, then, comes after the Hegelian organic state? The state might be a historically contingent optimal externalization in which reflective capacities (*noetics*) manifest, but reflectivity need not be tied to the confines of the state. Hui holds that reflection is not a property of a fixed substance (the human) but is the result of a process of hominization in which technology plays a critical role. Hui's critical question is whether imaginaries of planetary politics still enable the possibility of reflection: if not, freedom—and hence politics—would be impossible in the megamachine. Georgescu-Roegen's bioeconomics and Teilhard de Chardin's noospheric reflections are presented as possible imaginaries of planetary reflection and as potential alternatives to transhumanist dreams of singularity that essentially represent imaginaries of mechanization that rule out politics. However, interestingly, Georgescu-Roegen and Teilhard de Chardin also reveal the limits of Hegel's organicism; the megamachine must be thought thermodynamically, or even cybernetically, and it is this aspect that should be integrated into any political thought. The question then becomes: can we have a planetary thermodynamic co-existing with reason?

In answering this question, Hui leaves Hegel behind and attempts to make the question of planetary politics more tangible by turning to Schmitt, particularly his notions of sovereignty and the *Grossraum*. His proposal is to approach Schmitt in terms of his political *epistemology*—instead of most interpretations that view him as developing a political *theology.* Instead of theorizing the state of exception that grounds sovereignty as something analogous to a miracle in theological terms, Schmitt's decisionism, in which the distinction between friend and enemy is made, approaches sovereignty as the soul of the political machine, without which the state would be a mere administrative machine and hence depoliticize itself. In fact, Hui argues that Schmitt was aware of cybernetics and that his theory of sovereignty can be considered as a vitalist response to the risk of mechanistic homogeneity; it is the sovereign that ultimately makes heterogeneity (i.e., politics) possible. Technology serves as a battleground that threatens to erase politics and to transform the world into a neutral zone.

A POLITICS OF CO-EXISTENCE

How can we find a way to co-exist with planetary technology? And what kind of politics can be the foundation of co-existence? Building on Schmitt, digital technology and space technology are understood as spatial revolutions that reshape the *nomos* of the Earth. In Schmitt's work, the *nomos* designates the order and orientation underlying any concrete, explicit manifestation of politics. The crux is that the *nomos* is not a static entity but a dynamic process that is constitutive of world—this is why Hui proposes to understand this idea in Heideggerian terms. The nation-state is no longer an adequate response to the current *nomos*, which is something Schmitt already recognised when advocating already in 1952 that technological advancements

call for the political form of the *Grossraum*: a new spatial order in which the vulnerabilities of individual sovereign states are overcome in a multipolar international order. This political form can be said to appear as a quest for plurality in a spatial order that tends to move towards homogeneity, which is, for instance, exemplified in Silicon Valley's dreams of colonizing space or bioengineering the perfect body.

Hui argues that the political imaginary of Schmitt's *Grossraum* does not so much supersedes Hegel's nation-state as extends it. He effectively imagines a supra-national state; however, he does not provide a sufficient ground for pluralism. Is there an alternative that acknowledges the planetary nature of technology, suspends the nation-state, while at the same time preserving diversity? The danger of planetary technology is explicated through a discussion of Bergson, who argues that mechanization is the source of war because it replaces all human parts of the megamachine. The megamachine represents an ongoing material quest for resources, and since these are scarce and acquiring them aligns with state interests, Bergson holds that war must be the necessary outcome of mechanization. Hui considers the possibility of overcoming this state of affairs by underlining the recursivity of cybernetic machines, which must be contrasted with Bergson's mechanical interpretation. This move enables him to argue that we can have planetary technology while simultaneously resisting homogenization. The nation-state can no longer resist homogeneity and produce difference, not because it resembles a machine, but because it is not able to incorporate biodiversity, noodiversity, and technodiversity. Since technodiversity—in line with thinkers like Stiegler—conditions noodiversity, and both are in turn necessary for creating biodiversity, ensuring technodiversity is at the heart of responding to the threat of homogeneity.

The book concludes by explicitly posing the question of technodiversity, and particularly with the question of how we can reconcile the locality of technodiversity with the non-locality of planetary technology. Here, Hui returns to Hegel to argue that there can be unification without homogenization; a unified co-existence without turning a contradiction is possible, because unification can be based on fragmentation. Fragmentation presupposes sovereignty, for only in a sovereign act is it possible to step out of the megamachine. At the same time, there is currently a tension: "while the megamachine is growing planetarily, sovereignty is losing its power to intervene" (p.243). The matrix of technodiversity, noodiversity, and biodiversity serves as a new model for intervention that can help produce a difference that counters the displacement and disappearance of local and indigenous knowledge. Hui calls this an epistemological diplomacy that enables bifurcation within the megamachine and hence is a model for heterogeneity and the condition of possibility for locality. Planetary thought, then, is a response to a call for bifurcation we also find in the late work of Stiegler, where a plea for technodiversity serves as the ground for the development of reason when the risk of unreason announces itself.

Hui's own plea in the book makes a long journey around many Continental thinkers. In this review, I have primarily highlighted how Hegel and Schmitt have shaped his planetary thought. In discussion with them, Hui convincingly shows both the need for planetary thinking and that, if politics is indeed technological at heart, the nation-state is no longer an appropriate response to our current *nomos*. As with any attempt at planetary, or terrestrial, thinking, one is left with the question of how philosophy can come down to Earth again—to use a Latourian phrase. As Hui admits, his ideal of living with technics as a Simondonean mechanologist has yet to be worked out. Developing this idea further would help getting concrete in determining which relations to technology are arbitrary, and which ones are reasonable. Here we might find a technological politics that not only can think, but which also can act.

Data Access Statement

Not applicable.

Contributor Statement

Bas de Boer is the sole author of this article.

Use of AI

Not applicable.

Funding Statement

The author did not receive any financial support for the work on this article.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The author reports no conflict of interest.