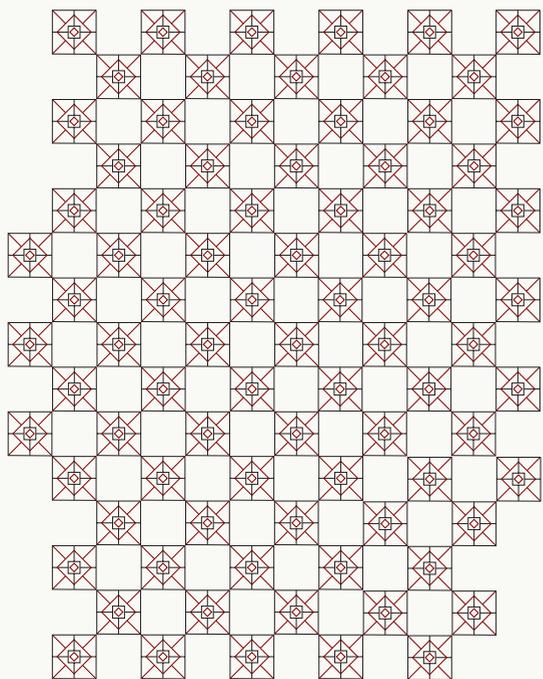# Retro
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Technocracy, or: The Fluctuation of Western Imaginaries of Progress in the 20th Century[1]

Tehnokracija, ali: spreminjanje zahodnih imaginarijev napredka v 20. stoletju

Sarah Lias Ceide

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a conceptual history of the inflationary term "technocracy" throughout the 20th century, showing that its rise in usage stemmed largely from its capacity to articulate fundamental critiques of the perceived excesses of progress. Whether referring to anxieties about "technization" or to statist ambitions in terms of economic policymaking, denunciations of technocracy linked to ideas of progress were numerous and evolved over the century, depending on who employed the concept – and, crucially, when. Drawing on examples from the United States, Germany, and Italy, the article demonstrates how the conceptual history of technocracy reflects the ongoing fluctuation of Western imaginaries of progress and discourses of modernity.

Keywords

technocracy, conceptual history, narratives of progress, modernity

IZVLEČEK

Članek raziskuje pojmovno zgodovino politično obarvanega izraza »tehnokracija« skozi 20. stoletje in skuša pokazati, da porast njegove rabe v veliki meri izhaja iz zmožnosti, da izrazi kritiko ekscesov napredka. Ne glede na to, ali se je izraz nanašal na tesnobo pred »tehnizacijo« ali na državne ambicije na področju gospodarskega načrtovanja, so bile obsodbe tehnokracije, povezane z idejami napredka, številne in so se skozi čas spreminjale glede na to, kdo je pojem uporabljal in, kar je ključno, kdaj. Na primerih Združenih držav, Nemčije in Italije članek pokaže, kako pojmovna zgodovina tehnokracije odraža stalno spreminjanje zahodnih imaginarijev napredka in diskurzov modernosti.

Ključne besede

tehnokracija, pojmovna zgodovina, naracije napredka, modernost

INTRODUCTION: THE MANY FACES OF "TECHNOCRACY"

Stemming from the combination of the old Greek terms *téchne* (τέχνη) and *kratos* (κράτος), translatable as "rule of the knowing," today "technocracy" is an inflationary, highly politicized, and mostly negatively connotated term. This becomes obvious when considering the widely differing contexts in which it is being used and, moreover, who exactly is using it. In the public sphere as well as within average colloquial usage, the most common intended effect when referring to technocracy seems to be criticism of society's over-technicization. In 2015, Pope Francis quite emblematically referred to a "technocratic paradigm" when warning Catholics about the dangers of everyday "*technology* [that] *tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic.*"[2] At the same time, in the context of Western political discourse and especially in that of right-wing populist parties or movements, technocracy has long been seen as an enemy force, and appears to represent a specific form of elite criticism, born out of the crisis of both the traditional party system and global economies.[3] As an example, one might take Marine Le Pen's various remarks denouncing the technocracy of the Macron government with regard to its lack of adaptability in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.[4] Strikingly similar rhetoric was used by the national-conservative wing of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party in 2015 in the so-called Erfurt Resolution, a document which aimed, among other things, at preventing the party from degenerating into technocracy and thus becoming too similar to its political opponents.[5] Finally, both within

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2   Pope Francis. "Encyclical Letter Laudato SI` of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home." 24 May 2015. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (access: May 2025).

3   Anti-technocratic positions are not exclusive to the right-wing spectrum of populist parties. In Italy, for instance, Peppe Grillo's left-wing party Movimento Cinque Stelle has always been a vocal critic of the country's supposed technocratization.

4   On this topic, see: Herman, Lise Esther, and Marta Lorimer. "Dancing with the Devil? Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen and the Articulation of a New Political Divide in France." *Nations and Nationalism*, 30/3 (2024), 425–440. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/nana.13001 (access: June 2025).

5   Grieß, Thielko. "Flügelkämpfe bei der Afd. 'Das Projekt ist in Gefahr': Björn Höcke im Gespräch." *Deutschlandfunk*, 24 March 2015. https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/fluegelkaempfe-bei-der-afd--das-projekt-ist-in-gefahr-100.html (access: June 2025).

public and political discourse, it can be observed that the denunciation of technocratic tendencies clearly feeds into fears of the erosion of democratic structures. This is usually the case with discourses that frame the former as being directly threatened by the absolutist aspirations of so-called "technocrats."[6] Through their depiction as stone-cold strategists, a financial elite pulling the strings of national and international politics, these technocrats are often at the core of present-day adaptations of traditional conspiracy narratives.[7]

While the term or concept of technocracy has long found its place within everyday language and imaginaries as well as within political discourse, it is no stranger to academic research, either. In fact, literature on the subject, especially in the field of social and political science, has multiplied exponentially since the turn of the century. This is mainly thanks to a quite peculiar phenomenon that started in the late 1990s: the political materialization of technocracy. Most of the related scholarly literature is concerned with the phenomenon of Europe's so-called "technocratic governments," which have become a familiar sight on the continent's political stage over the last 30 years.[8] Interestingly, here some of the above-presented imaginaries and narratives relating to technocracy resurface, for instance when

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6   This especially concerns the present-day automatism in the association between technocracy and state-led economic policymaking tied to crises or transformations of the state, as is the case with the recent phenomenon of so-called "technocratic governments."

7   Popular discourses in particular tend to create direct associations between the term technocracy and looming dictatorship, or at least, anti-democratic tendencies. This trend seemed to worsen during the COVID-19 pandemic. On this, see: Oana, Ioana-Elena, and Abel Bojar. "Populism, Anti-Technocratic Attitudes, and COVID-19 Related Conspiracy Beliefs across Europe." *Comparative European Politics*, 21/4 (2023), 515–534.

8   The focus of these texts has ranged from prosopographical analyses of technocrats to comparisons of technocratic cabinets' policymaking with that of their predecessors. See, among others: Improta, Marco. "Inside Technocracy: Features and Trajectories of Technocratic Ministers in Italy (1948–2021)." *Italian Political Science*, 16/3 (2021), 220–240; Bertsou, Eri, and Daniele Caramani, eds. *The Technocratic Challenge to Democracy*. London: Routledge, 2020, 113–130.

political scientists *tout court* theorize the existence of a technocratic elite or technocrats in Western societies.[9]

   But why has technocracy become a buzzword that mirrors increasingly polarized positions and political cultures, and, more importantly, when did this term gain prominence? These questions stand at the center of this article. It argues that the surge in the use of the term technocracy has happened mainly due to the concept's seemingly innate criticism of what may be perceived as excessive progress. Rarely defined, contextualized, or historicized, the popularity of the term technocracy seems to lie in its ability to express criticism of different imaginaries of progress, whether it be of rapid technological expansion, the scientization of politics, or the fear of a possible erosion of Western values and democracy through political changes. Building on this basic assumption, the article goes on to argue that neither the conceptual ambiguity nor the inflationary use of technocracy in relation to the notion of progress are to be considered a novelty of the 21st century, much less exclusive to it. In considering the concept of technocracy as crucial to discourses of modernity, the article treats it as a conceptual mirror of the idea of progress throughout the 20th century.[10] Building on the hypothesis that the former constantly mirrors and reflects the changes the latter underwent over time, the article focuses on the varying meanings of technocracy, as well as on its instrumentalization by certain individuals or groups over the course of the past century, revealing the fluidity or fluctuation of imaginaries of progress in Western societies. Through the analysis of sources and examples from the US, Germany, and Italy between the interwar period and the end of the Cold War, the article will show that, on a transatlantic level, the term technocracy came to signify the desire for

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9   For example, see: Cozzolino, Adriano, and Diego Giannone. "Technocrats in (the Crises of) the State. Political Change and State Transformations in Italy." *Interdisciplinary Political Studies*, 7/1 (2021), 5–34. On the ever-present issue of how to define technocrats, technocracy, and technocratic governments, see: McDonnell, Duncan, and Marco Valbruzzi. "Defining and Classifying Technocrat-Led and Technocratic Governments." *European Journal of Political Research*, 53/4 (2014), 654–671.

10   For the historiographical tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte* and its use in the reconstruction of historical temporalities, see: Koselleck, Reinhart. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

progress at one moment and its excesses or even the opposite – regress – in the next, depending on who invoked the term and when.

AUTOCRATIC SYMPATHIES AND THE FUSION OF MAN AND MACHINE: TECHNOCRACY DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD

As has been established earlier, today two of the most common interpretations and intended usages of the term technocracy, as well as of its personification, technocrats, refer to a supposed excess of progress and its looming, potentially devastating effects. Firstly, the radically progressive, future-oriented management of resources and policymaking through technological solutions or by non-political experts, often in the economic and financial fields; and secondly – the consequence of this very technicization or "rule of the knowing" – the oncoming of totalitarianism and despotism. As stated above, neither of these two consequential conceptions should be seen as a novelty. In fact, both are rooted within perceptions of modernity and progress that were born out of the crisis-ridden early 1930s, when the term technocracy first gained global attention among the public.

Even though it had been known in intellectual and academic circles since the 1920s,[11] the term technocracy made its way into international headlines in 1930, thanks to Virginia-born engineer Howard Scott. On the back of the devastating financial crisis that started in 1929, Scott had founded Technocracy Incorporated, often referred to as Technocracy Inc., a group of like-minded engineers who understood themselves to be part of a revolutionary movement rather than just a group of socially active specialists. At the core of the organization stood the objective of bringing to life the so-called "technate," a utopian model of society based on the

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11   While the term technocracy was first introduced by William H. Smith in 1919, it would really attract the public's attention two years later, when the US sociologist Thorstein Bunde Veblen published his theory of "economic collectivism." Here, technocracy was defined as the "reign of engineers" and clearly influenced by socialist ideals. See: Veblen, Thorstein. *The Engineers and the Price System*. New York: W.B. Huebsch, 1921.

conviction that capitalism had ultimately failed.[12] According to Scott and his fellow technocrats, the capitalist model should therefore be substituted by the supranational system of the technate, a superstate in which the old political elite, seen as incapable and unable to salvage the US and the industrialized West as a whole, would be marginalized or even ousted from political and economic decision-making in favor of "the knowing" – namely experts, and first and foremost engineers.[13]

While the scientific value of Scott's complex and often convoluted theories would be widely criticized and eventually lead to the engineer's downfall,[14] their impact on the conceptual evolution of technocracy for decades to come cannot be underestimated. In fact, when they first reached major news outlets, amidst the economic crisis and the generally bleak social and economic terms, Technocracy Inc.'s objectives spread rapidly, first across the US, then around the globe, with the "technocracy frenzy" reaching its peak by 1933. In January of that year, the German newspaper *Kölnische Zeitung* stated that the debates surrounding technocracy "*presently consume more ink than all of the other trending topics in the field of economics put together.*"[15] This did not mean, however, that Scott's theories were universally accepted or seen benevolently. In Italy, for example, the prestigious newspaper *Corriere della Sera* voiced some cynical criticism,

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12   The group would put great emphasis on outreach work, publishing multiple texts which aimed at explaining their theories to the broader public. See, among others: Scott, Howard. *Introduction to Technocracy*. New York: Technocracy Inc., 1933; Weishaar, Wayne. *"Technocracy: An Appraisal."* *The North American Review*, 235/2 (1933), 121–128. On Technocracy Inc. and its legacy, see: Willeke, Stefan. *Die Technokratiebewegung in Nordamerika und Deutschland zwischen den Weltkriegen: Eine vergleichende Analyse*. Lausanne: Peter Lang, 1995.

13   Technocracy Inc. *"What is Technocracy?"* *The Technocrat*, 3/4 (1937), 3–5.

14   As early as the spring of 1933, at the very height of his popularity, Scott and his theories had come under intense scrutiny in the US, being heavily criticized both by scientists and politicians. Among other things, Scott was accused of having faked his academic degree, as well as fabricated empirical data. From there on, the engineer's downfall only accelerated, and he was quickly ousted from academic circles, with Technocracy Inc. consequentially losing its promising momentum. See: *"Technocracy Cult Now Is on the Wane; Break Between Columbia and Howard Scott Brought the Movement to a Climax."* *The New York Times*, 29 January 1933. On Scott and Technocracy Inc. after 1933, see: Johnston, Sean F. *"Technological Parables and Iconic Illustrations: American Technocracy and the Rhetoric of the Technological Fix."* *History and Technology*, 2/4 (2017), 196–219.

15   *"Maschinenkraft als Wertmesser. Kritik der Technokratie."* *Kölnische Zeitung*, 26 January 1933.

attributing Technocracy Inc.'s success mainly to an *"American obsession* [...] *with pseudo-science"*: *"No one really understood Scott's line of thought, yet everyone was eager to lay it out to other people."*[16] Still, only a few articles heavily criticized or questioned the American engineer, even when highlighting the underlying implication of autocratic rule within the technate. On the contrary, overall this aspect seemed to garner more approval than outrage, echoing a general trend of "autocratic sympathy" during the interwar period.[17] The German *Industrie- und Handelsblatt der Dortmunder Zeitung*, for instance, praised the US technocrats for their scientific conviction. But most importantly, in calling for an implementation of the technate in the near future, the newspaper dismissed all criticism of a potential totalitarian regime led by engineers, stating that Technocracy Inc.'s striving for social and economic reform would indeed justify a restriction of individual rights: *"the French Revolution is not the only era in history in which crimes have been committed in the name of freedom."*[18]

This first phase of international circulation of the concept of technocracy is highly revealing with regard to its future interpretations and usages. Besides the lingering accusation of totalitarianism, the debate surrounding Howard Scott's technocracy gave birth to two further central aspects – the red thread, one could say – at the heart of the term's conceptual history for a century to come. In both cases, the intertwining of technocracy and progress is crucial. On the one hand, by putting production – meaning the mechanical forging of material goods and machines required to produce them – at the center of the technate model, Scott and his associates supported the idea of *"man adapting to the machine, and not the machine to man."*[19] In the arena of public opinion, this fed into well-established dystopian imaginaries of progress, such as the "man-machine-dilemma," meaning the fear of unstoppable technological progress soon leading to

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16   *"Il fallimento della 'tecnocrazia'." Corriere della Sera*, 27 January 1933.

17   On the centrifugal social and political forces at play in post-war Europe, see: Leonhard, Jörn. *Der überforderte Frieden. Versailles und die Welt 1918–1923.* München: C.H. Beck, 2018.

18   Low, U.M. *"Probleme um die Technokratie." Industrie- und Handelsblatt der Dortmunder Zeitung,* 25 February 1933.

19   *"Kennen Sie Technokratie?" Abendausgabe der Neuen Mannheimer Zeitung*, 24 February 1933.

manpower being subjugated to and substituted by machines. This, on the one hand, eventually resulted in the spread of a conceptual association between the notion of technocracy and a new, potentially dangerous concept of the post-industrial process of teleological progress. On the other hand, the debate set the precedent of understanding technocracy as anti--politics. By pushing for the rise of the engineers, as the *Neue Mannheimer Zeitung* put it in 1933, Scott seemed intent on forcing economic and societal progress through the "*rule of technicians, of scientists over a world that has been led to the brink of collapse by politicians.*"[20] This opened up a discourse in which technocracy was not only praised or criticized as yet another post-crisis solution to the economic and social problems of the present, but also came to embody the growing loss of faith in traditional politics and the corresponding turn toward non-political experts.

While Scott's theories sparked lively debates everywhere in Europe, their influence was particularly felt in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, two regimes aiming to place themselves at the peak of technological and societal progress, with the self-declared revolutionary objective of forging new men and empires.[21] In the context of the Fascist and National Socialist discourses of modernity, one can observe a complex process of conceptual appropriation with regard to technocracy. This process involved distancing the regimes' own perceptions of technocracy and progress from external ones, like those associated with Howard Scott and Technocracy Inc., or with Soviet socialism. Especially in the German case, but partially also in the Italian one, Scott's idea of the rule of experts completely opposed the so-called *Führerprinzip*, the absolute and irrefutable centrality of the Führer in all political and military decision-making. In fact, when asked by the American press about his own opinion of Technocracy Inc. in 1933, Benito Mussolini clearly distanced himself from the US technocrats,

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20 *Ibid.*

21 On Italian Fascism and National Socialism and their imaginaries of modernity, see: Welzer, Harald, ed. *Nationalsozialismus und Moderne.* Tübingen: Ed. Diskord, 1993; Esposito, Fernando. *Mythische Moderne: Aviatik, Faschismus und die Sehnsucht nach Ordnung in Deutschland und Italien.* München: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2011.

condemning their theories as "*too materialistic.*"[22] At the same time, both regimes recognized the necessity of separating their imaginaries of technocracy and progress from those propagated by the Soviet state, seen as backward and anti-progressive. Indeed, once the notion of technocracy started to spread globally, a strong public association between the technate model and totalitarianism was established, a process that heavily implied an innate affinity between technocracy and Soviet socialism. Of course, this conceptual entanglement was one both Fascism and National Socialism were keen to avoid when forging their own interpretations of technocracy. This effort of both terminological appropriation and distancing was reflected in the press. In Germany, shortly after Hitler's rise to power, the *Dortmunder Zeitung* stated that "*Socialists have always tried to stand in the way of technological progress,*" while "*Technocracy wants to complete the victory of the machine.*"[23] In a similar fashion, the Italian *Corriere della Sera* stressed that technocracy "*has nothing to do with the moral or political impulses that define the bolshevist model.*"[24]

Technocracy was temporarily stripped of its negative, presumably anti--human and anti-political connotations and adapted to the regimes' ideological framework. The notion ended up aptly capturing the idea of radical and violent progress propagated by both Fascism and National Socialism. The Fascist example shows clearly how the regime was able to develop its very own understanding of technocracy, one that ultimately took the word's menacing conceptual implications – both the man-machine-dilemma and the politician-expert-dichotomy – and completely reversed them. This is emblematically demonstrated in an article published in 1940 by the staunch Fascist Cornelio di Marzio in *Corriere della Sera*. Here, di Marzio presented technocracy as naturally encapsulated within the essence of Fascism itself. To the author, Fascist ideology called for the machine to serve the regime's will, with it therefore being always subordinate to men – a fun-

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22   *"Mussolini Sees Master Mind Needed Here; Bars Technocratic Rule as Too Materialistic."* The New York Times, 11 January 1933.

23   Low, *"Probleme um die Technokratie."*

24   De' Stefani, Alberto. *"Tecnocrazia."* Corriere della Sera, 12 January 1933.

damental subversion of Howard Scott's technocracy.[25] At the same time, di Marzio also subverted the dichotomy between politics, which he viewed as representing human sentiment, and expertise, or technology-oriented rationality, by stating: "*We cannot allow there to be conflict between our sentiments and our rationality. Technology has to completely dominate raw nature, but, at the same time, it has to be at our service, not at the service of some abstract and surreal concept of progress but rather of our precise political imperialism.*"[26]

The end of World War II marked not only the downfall of the Nazi and Fascist empires, but also that of their very own and peculiar interpretations of technocracy. In the context of mounting international tensions between East and West within the new, post-war world order, and with Howard Scott's grip on the term having long faded, technocracy would morph more and more into a concept with extremely negative connotations. Indeed, it became increasingly associated with totalitarianism, in the form of the West's old and new enemies: Nazi Germany, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and its allies, on the other. At the same time, the concept of technocracy also resurfaced as the by now well-established men-machine dilemma – an expression of society's fear of excessive progress on the back of rapid and astounding scientific and technological innovations – and was increasingly applied to the political arena.

ANTICOMMUNISM, "THE MACHINE THAT THINKS," AND PLANNING PARADIGMS: TECHNOCRACY DURING THE COLD WAR

When philosopher Herbert Marcuse referred to Nazi Germany in the early 1940s as "*the German version of technocracy*" in which "*morale fades into technology,*" he set a precedent in the association among totalitarianism, moral degeneration, and technocracy that was only destined to grow

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25   Di Marzio, Cornelio. *"Tecnica e politica." Corriere della Sera,* 16 April 1940.

26   *Ibid.*

stronger after 1945.[27] In the first decades after the war, this association was extended to include – or rather returned to including once again – Soviet socialism and communism, establishing technocracy as a dividing criterion between a supposed progressive West and a regressive or backward East. In 1953, the Italian press emblematically described "Stalin's new man" as an "*executioner of orders, a cold and non-conscious instrument of Soviet technocracy.*"[28] This strong anticommunist interpretation of technocracy quite often and notably merged with the resurfaced man–machine–dilemma. In this regard, another example from Italy is quite telling. In an article published in *Corriere della Sera* in 1950 under the title "The Machine that Thinks," the reader was first informed of the newest invention, a highly efficient calculator or computer, then immediately warned of the coming of the "reign of the machines," meaning the age of technocracy.[29] The latter, the author ominously predicted, would forge citizens similar to "Stalin's new man" described above: thanks to "*machine*[s] *that think*," "*Technocracy will produce a collective individual, standardized* [...] *without any sense of criticism or the ability to make distinctions.*"[30] Similar processes of conceptual association could be observed in West Germany. During the 78th Catholic convention in Berlin in 1958, attendants were first instructed on the menace of socialist ideas and propaganda, and then immediately warned of technocracy, here meaning excessive technological progress threatening all of humanity.[31]

However, the fear of technocracy as an excess of progress was not exclusively associated with totalitarian regimes or machines. During the Cold War, certain scientific breakthroughs also contributed to this particular conceptual entanglement. This was especially true with respect to nuclear physics and nuclearization in a broader sense. On this matter, in

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27   Marcuse, Herbert. *Schriften aus dem Nachlass: Feindanalysen. Über die Deutschen.* Ed. Peter-Erwin Jansen. Springe: Zu Klampen, 2007.

28   Vegas, Ferdinando. "Vita e morte di Stalin." *La Stampa*, 17 February 1953.

29   Bertagnoni, Alfredo. "La macchina che pensa. Meraviglia dell'avvenire." *Corriere della Sera*, 13 November 1950.

30   *Ibid.*

31   "Unsere Sorge der Mensch, unser Heil der Herr." *Honnefer Volkszeitung*, 16 August 1958.

1954 the famous publicist Robert Jungk stated that in both Europe and the US people had lost their faith in the "good scientist," who was now seen as part of a new, shadowy, and destructive technocratic elite.[32] In fact, in the US, as early as 1946, *The New York Times* had foreseen the dawn of a new technocracy on the back of the 1945 nuclear attacks on Japan.[33] Similar views were also expressed throughout the 1950s in the West-German and Italian press in the context of progressive nuclearization.[34] This led to a new, concrete personification of the concept for the first time since Scott's technocrats of the 1930s. During the Cold War, the term technocrat rose to unprecedented popularity, as it came to describe a member of different post-war elites born out of what was perceived as the dizzying scientific, societal, and political progress of the post-war economic boom. Far from including only nuclear scientists, the term technocrat also ended up being extended to include decision-makers within newly founded supranational institutions, such as those of NATO or of the European Economic Community (EEC). As the German historian Dirk van Laak has stressed, these organizations "*were from the very start suspected of being agencies of technocracy,*" and were perceived as "*strongholds of soulless practical constraints.*"[35] Seemingly in confirmation of this assessment, in 1953 the Italian journalist Beniamino De Ritis had already defined the different, recently created economic, philanthropic, and political unions of the post-war era as "*distant ghosts*" and "*secret spaces of contemporary technocracy.*"[36]

The revival of the use of the term technocracy as a criticism of excessive progress, or the lack thereof, as well as its personification, the technocrat, led to the proliferation of the term's usage in the public, political, and aca-

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32   Jungk, Robert. "Europe and American technocracy." In: Vero Roberti, "L'Europa teme l'avvento del tetro regno dei 'robots'." *Corriere della Sera*, 8 April 1954.

33   "Atom Seen Causing New 'Technocracy'." *The New York Times*, 7 January 1946.

34   See, for instance: Sacchi, Filippo. "Tutti uguali di fronte all'atomica." *La Stampa*, 1 April 1954.

35   Van Laak, Dirk. "Technokratie im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts – eine einflussreiche 'Hintergrundideologie'." In: *Theorien und Experimente der Moderne. Europas Gesellschaften im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Lutz Rafael, 101–128. Köln: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012, 123.

36   De Ritis cites the examples of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). De Ritis, Beniamino. "Il mistero delle maiuscole." *Corriere della Sera*, 27 June 1953.

demic fields during the Cold War. "*Ten years ago, technocracy* [...] *was at best a keyword for informal discussions in small sociological circles,*" the German sociologists Claus Koch and Dieter Senghaas wrote in 1970.[37] Now, the authors found, its usage had become increasingly widespread everywhere in West Germany: academics, student protesters, and politicians alike made use of the term to express a seemingly indistinct criticism of a wide range of present-day problems and conflicts.[38] In parallel to what occurred in the 1930s, this second "technocracy frenzy" extended far beyond the German-speaking world. When in 1969 *The New York Times* called the former Nazi functionary Albert Speer a technocrat, a member of the now almost forgotten, but still existing Technocracy Inc. was quick to denounce this supposed improper terminology: "*I've heard of Premier Trudeau, 'the technocrat'* [...] *and of so-called technocrats in all parts of the world, but the latest reference in* The New York Times Magazine *is going too far.*"[39]

One of the reasons for technocracy's renewed and inflationary use also lay in the fact that, during the 1960s, the notion became heavily politicized. In the context of Europe's economic "planning enthusiasm,"[40] the concepts of technocracy and the technocrat would once again reveal their intertwinement with different imaginaries of progress and modernity. In this regard, the Italian case is particularly telling. From the mid-1960s onward, a number of moderate left-wing cabinets implemented the so-called *programmazione economica*, Italy's state-led, partial planning effort of the

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37   Koch, Claus, and Dieter Senghaas, eds. *Texte zur Technokratiediskussion.* Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1970, 5.

38   *Ibid.*

39   Sheldon, John. "Speer is no Technocrat." *The New York Times*, 16 November 1969.

40   When referring to the 1960s and early 1970s, the German expressions *Planungsenthusiasmus* and *Planungseuphorie* describe a period marked by intense belief in humanity's future as an entirely "plannable reality." Whether in the field of economic policymaking, city architecture, or landscaping, planning seemingly became the "cure for all ills." See: van Laak, Dirk. "Planung, Planbarkeit und Planungseuphorie." *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 16 February 2010. http://docupedia.de/zg/van_laak_planung_v1_de_2010 (access: 12 June 2025); Haupt, Heinz-Gerhard, and Jörg Requate, eds. *Aufbruch in die Zukunft. Die 1960er Jahre zwischen Planungseuphorie und kulturellem Wandel. DDR, CSSR und Bundesrepublik Deutschland im Vergleich.* Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2004.

national economy and industry.[41] Heavily criticized by some, cheered on by others, the *programmazione economica* has to be counted as among the most divisive topics in Italian political history. Soon, in fact, there was a heated back and forth between state functionaries and representatives of the private industry, with the former convinced of the state interventions' positive outcome and the latter feeling cheated out of their right to have a say in the political arena. Before long, both camps would fall back on the term technocracy in order to voice criticism of their opponents' positions. In 1968, Giuseppe Togni, the president of Italy's Managerial Federation (CIDA), called for close cooperation between the private and the public. Otherwise, also in light of the *programmazione*, Togni feared that "*technocracy might conquer the centers of decision-making.*"[42] Meanwhile, Giorgio Petrilli, the president of the state-owned Institute of Industrial Reconstruction (IRI) and a vocal supporter of the *programmazione economica*, fell back on the term technocracy when voicing criticism of what he perceived as Western societies' excessive privatization. According to Petrilli, only state-led interventions in the economic field could reverse a process that had recently seen "*economic decision-making*" being handed to "*a small group of technocrats,*" in this case managers of private industry.[43] These examples are quite revealing with regard to the fluctuating nature of interpretations of technocracy. The clashing views surrounding a Europe-wide euphoria over a politically and economically plannable future once again brought to light not only the negative connotations of technocracy, but also its interpretation as an obstacle to progress and modernity – either as an enemy of neoliberalism or of state-led consumer engineering.[44]

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41   See, for instance: Rangone, Nicoletta. *Le programmazioni economiche. L'intervento pubblico in economia tra piani e regolazioni.* Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007.

42   "Auspicata più collaborazione tra politici e tecnici." *Corriere della Sera*, 26 January 1968.

43   ACS (Archivio Centrale dello Stato), Fondo IRI, Numerazione nera, serie 2: Presidente, serie 1: Giuseppe Petrilli, serie 2: Scritti e discorsi, busta 32: Programmazione e personalità umana, Vortragstext, Collegio Ghislieri, Pavia, 29 March 1968.

44   Logemann, Jan, Gary Cross, and Ingo Köhler, eds. *Consumer Engineering, 1920s–1970s: Marketing Between Expert Planning and Consumer Responsiveness.* Berlin: Springer, 2019.

As the enthusiasm for planning gradually faded everywhere over the course of the 1970s, the trend of associating technocracy with statism would only intensify. Now, the term was essentially equated with a series of failed economic planning programs and mainly used to "stereotype an enemy image," that of the technocrat as a machine-like individual steering political and economic decisions, completely void of human emotion.[45] This clearly put technocracy at odds with an important global trend at the time: the movement that was born from the 1968 social uprisings, gained momentum through the Vietnam War, and was marked by a widespread public push for the progressive humanization and ethicization of politics. As a consequence, at least until its third revival around the turn of the 21st century in the context of the European technocratic governments, the term technocracy would be shunned as a progress-opposing relic of the past, something once again mainly associated either with polarizing notions such as statism and socialism, or with the traditional man-machine-dilemma.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE LONG SHADOWS OF TECHNOCRACY

As has been shown in the previous sections, the understanding of the term technocracy changed noticeably over the course of just three decades, from the 1930s, through to the end of World War II, and into the early decades of the Cold War. The changes in the idea of progress mirrored in these varying interpretations cannot be overlooked. The article has shown how, in the context of the 20th century, the term technocracy has been mainly used to express specific, future-oriented criticisms of the present with regard to scientific, societal, or political progress. Such criticisms could frame progress as lacking or, on the contrary, as excessive. In this sense, the partial conceptual history of technocracy presented here has revealed complex and widely different phases of the understanding of modernity and progress, from the US to Germany and Italy, touching on some of our recent history's most important phenomena, such as capitalism and socia-

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45 Lenk, Hans. *Technokratie als Ideologie: Sozialphilosophische Beiträge zu einem politischen Dilemma.* Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1973, 155.

lism, democracy and totalitarianism, as well as the discourses surrounding technologies and weapons in times of war and peace. It is important to stress that the multifaceted meaning of technocracy and its many uses are not only revealing with regard to the past century, as it has proven to be a key term in the analysis of complex present-day phenomena as well, such as populism, supranational institution-building, and policymaking. It is indeed no coincidence that, since the 1990s and the creation of the first so-called technocratic governments, the term technocracy has witnessed renewed attention in political and public discourse. The fact that Elon Musk has been called a technocrat by many is not surprising; what may raise some eyebrows, however, is the direct parallel being drawn between his politics and that of Technocracy Inc.[46] Such examples show how promising the conceptual analysis of the multifaceted notion of technocracy really is: to this day, the term is able to tie together imaginaries of modernities of both the past and present by continuing to challenge convictions of either static or teleological progress, not only on a local or national, but also on an international level.

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46   Hiltscher, Johannes. "Technocracy, Inc.: Elon Musk und das Erbe der Technokraten." *Golem*, 12 September 2024. https://www.golem.de/news/technocracy-inc-elon-musk-und-das-erbe-der--technokraten-2409-188232.html (access: 13 June 2025).

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POVZETEK

Danes izraz »tehnokracija« raziskovalci označujejo kot pojmovno ohlapen, kljub temu pa je tudi izjemno razširjen. V 21. stoletju se je pojavil v političnem diskurzu kot priročna upodobitev sovražnika predvsem med desnopopulističnimi strankami in gibanji. Toda zakaj je prav tehnokracija postala tako vesplošno prisotna beseda v političnih in javnih razpravah?

Članek sledi zgodovini tega spornega pojma skozi 20. stoletje in skuša pokazati, da vzpon tehnokracije še zdaleč ni bil zgolj nacionalni pojav. Njeno širjenje je mogoče v veliki meri pripisati edinstveni zmožnosti pojma, da izrazi kritične odzive na to, kar je bilo razumljeno kot pretirani družbeni, znanstveni ali industrijski napredek. Od tridesetih let 20. stoletja dalje je postala prav zaradi te značilnosti tehnokracija v razpravah o napredku še posebej privlačna – ne le v medijih in širši javnosti, temveč tudi med politiki in ekonomskimi vplivneži.

Zgodnje širjenje pojma tehnokracije je povezano predvsem z ameriškim inženirjem Howardom Scottom, ki je ob začetku tridesetih let pojem postavil v središče svoje kritike kapitalizma in predlagal, da naj bi politično odločanje prevzeli strokovnjaki in inženirji. Preplet »vladavine strokovnjakov« z mehanizirano proizvodnjo in nezaupanjem v obstoječe politične elite je sprožil prve obsežne razprave o tehnokraciji – hkrati kot obljubi racionalnega napredka in kot nevarni odmik v avtoritarno »vladavino stroja«. Pojem je hitro prodrl tudi v Evropo, kjer sta ga fašistična Italija in nacistična Nemčija preoblikovali in uporabili za lastne predstave o modernosti in tehnološki preobrazbi družbe.

Po drugi svetovni vojni se je pomen pojma spremenil, saj so tehnokracijo vse pogosteje povezovali z antikomunizmom in strahom pred jedrsko znanostjo. Obenem se je razširil tudi na področje ekonomskega upravljanja: od jedrskih fizikov in vojaških strategov do birokratov v mednarodnih institucijah, povsod je bil »tehnokrat« vse pogosteje podoba odtujene elite, odrezane od moralnih in demokratičnih vrednot. V šestdesetih letih se je

razumevanje pojma ponovno spremenilo, ko je tehnokracija postala del sporov o državnem gospodarskem načrtovanju.

Članek torej na primerih Združenih držav, Nemčije in Italije pokaže, da je tehnokracija skozi zadnje stoletje delovala kot pojmovno ogledalo ideje napredka, ki je odsevalo njene neprestane preobrazbe v različnih nacio-nalnih okoljih ter v širših mednarodnih okvirih.

Author's Contact Information

Tibor Rutar, PhD in Sociology, Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor
Koroška cesta 160, SI – 2000 Maribor, Slovenia
tibor.rutar@um.si

Robin Dolar, MA in History, PhD Candidate, Junior Researcher

Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana
Aškerčeva cesta 2, SI – 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
robin.dolar@ff.uni–lj.si

Augusto Petter, PhD in History, ATER (Temporary Teaching and Research Attaché)

Department of History, Sciences Po Paris
27 rue Saint–Guillaume, 75337 Paris, France
augusto.petter@sciencespo.fr

Julija Šuligoj, BA in French Studies, MA in History, PhD Candidate

Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana
Aškerčeva cesta 2, SI – 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
julija.suligoj95@gmail.com

Miroslav Vašík, MA in History, PhD Candidate

Institute of History, Faculty of Arts, Charles University
nám. J. Palacha 1/2, CZ – 116 38 Staré Město, Czechia
vasik.miroslav@gmail.com

Sarah Lias Ceide, PhD in History, Research Associate

Department of History, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg
Grabengasse 3–5, DE – 69117 Heidelberg, Germany
sarah.liasceide@zegk.uni–heidelberg.de

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Kontakti avtorjev

Tibor Rutar, doc. dr. sociologije

Oddelek za sociologijo, Filozofska fakulteta, Univerza v Mariboru
Koroška cesta 160, SI – 2000 Maribor, Slovenija
tibor.rutar@um.si

Robin Dolar, mag. zgodovine, doktorski študent, mladi raziskovalec

Oddelek za zgodovino, Filozofska fakulteta, Univerza v Ljubljani
Aškerčeva cesta 2, SI – 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija
robin.dolar@ff.uni–lj.si

Augusto Petter, dr. zgodovine, ATER (začasni učitelj in raziskovalec)

Oddelek za zgodovino, Sciences Po Paris
27 rue Saint–Guillaume, 75337 Pariz, Francija
augusto.petter@sciencespo.fr

Julija Šuligoj, dipl. francistka, mag. zgodovine, doktorska študentka

Oddelek za zgodovino, Filozofska fakulteta, Univerza v Ljubljani
Aškerčeva cesta 2, SI – 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija
julija.suligoj95@gmail.com

Miroslav Vašík, mag. zgodovine, doktorski študent

Inštitut za zgodovino, Filozofska fakulteta, Karlova univerza
nám. J. Palacha 1/2, CZ – 116 38 Staré Město, Češka
vasik.miroslav@gmail.com

Sarah Lias Ceide, dr. zgodovine, raziskovalna sodelavka

Oddelek za zgodovino, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg
Grabengasse 3–5, DE – 69117 Heidelberg, Nemčija
sarah.liasceide@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de

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