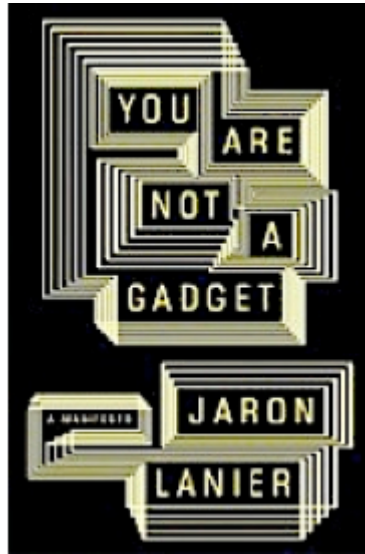




A Review of Lanier's "You Are Not a Gadget"

In an age that glorifies specialization, and often threatens to narrow the interests and achievements of individuals to subfields sterilely reduced to less than an intellectual handbreadth, a person who is truly multifaceted and who offers contributions to a broad array of fields is to be received as a treasure. The recent "manifesto" produced by Jaron Lanier — one of the giants of "virtual reality" research — continues to demonstrate that its author is one such individual.



In *You Are Not a Gadget — A Manifesto*, Lanier expresses his pessimism concerning the societal influences of various aspects of the emerging Internet pseudo-cultures, and the pernicious effects which such influences could have on the future of human civilization. Writing, in short, as one who has a thoroughgoing understanding of the current state of technology, and a certain reverence for the human spirit, he cautions his readers to take care in embracing elements of the Internet "hive mind" (e.g., Wikipedia), but in tones far removed from the Luddites. This is not to say that the work is faultless; undoubtedly Lanier's *Manifesto* betrays certain weaknesses in its author's overall argument. Nevertheless, his careful reasoning and depth of understanding of several fields of human knowledge have resulted in a book worthy of careful consideration.

The motivating concern behind Lanier's *Manifesto* is fundamentally spiritual in nature: "One might ask, 'If I am blogging, twittering, and wikiing a lot, how does that change who I am?' or 'If the "hive mind" is my audience, who am I?' ... 'What is a person?' If I knew the answer to that, I might be able to program an artificial person in a computer. But I can't. Being a person is not a pat formula, but a quest, a mystery, a leap of faith" (pp. 4-5). Lanier's concern is that certain technological trends deemphasize those traits that are vital to this mystery, and attempt to conform the essence of humanity to the limitations of certain technologies. The result is a diminution of the human spirit that stifles that which is essential to that which is best in man, and reduces his capacities to conform to the limitations of his technology, rather than enhancing his technologies to give full expression to the mystery of his



existence.

There is a fundamentally libertarian inclination to the whole of Lanier's manifesto; the reduction of human beings to a state of being perceived as mere "subprocesses" in a larger, computational process is one that he adamantly opposes throughout *You Are Not a Gadget*. A brief review cannot do justice to the breadth of Lanier's argument and the intrinsically personal aspects of elements of his argumentation. Suffice to say that he documents an inherently collectivist mentality at work in many of the choices that are being made on behalf of those who now inhabit the emerging "world" of the Internet, and that few users appreciate the character of the changes that are being imposed on their worldview.

Lanier makes the point that many of the individuals who are reshaping our world have little understanding of the implications of their action; they have absorbed a collectivism which wars against the principles that they may imagine motivate them: "Marx's ideas still color utopian technological thinking, including many of the thoughts that appear to be libertarian on the surface" (p. 78). The "hive mind" mentality, which is praised by some and perpetuated by many, is particularly troubling to Lanier, and he observes at one point:

It's not crazy to worry that, with millions of people connected through a medium that sometimes brings out their worst tendencies, massive, fascist-style mobs could rise up suddenly. I worry about the next generation of young people around the world growing up with Internet-based technology that emphasizes crowd aggregation, as is the current fad. Will they be more likely to succumb to pack dynamics when they come of age?

What's to prevent the acrimony from scaling up? Unfortunately, history tells us that collectivist ideals can mushroom into large-scale social disasters. The fascias and communes of the past started out with small numbers of idealistic revolutionaries. I am afraid we might be setting ourselves up for a reprise. The recipe that led to social catastrophe in the past was economic humiliation combined with collectivist ideology. We already have the ideology in its new digital packaging, and it's entirely possible we could face dangerously traumatic economic shocks in the coming decades [p. 64].

Lanier observes, and passionately protests, the current flatness of cultural expression that marks much of cultural expression. Lanier's own career in the realm of music offers him insights into the cultural decline that has occurred within that arena; artistic expression has been sacrificed on the altar of "open culture," and the imagined bloom of individual talent that was supposed to emerge in the aftermath of the decline of traditional outlets (recording companies), has actually proven to be a virtual desert. In Lanier's words, "The tiny number of success stories is worrisome. The history of the web is filled with novelty-driven success stories that can never be repeated" (p. 93). What has emerged in the realm of music is not creativity; "The process of reinvention of life through music appears to have stopped.... Where is the new music? Everything is retro, retro, retro" (p. 129).

Again, in Lanier's assessment, the antipathy for property rights that permeates much of the "open culture" rhetoric is techno-socialism; "I can imagine that this must sound like a strange exhortation to some readers, since socialism might seem to be the ultimate taboo in libertarian Silicon Valley, but there is an awful lot of stealth socialism going on beneath the breath in digital circles" (p. 104). But the right to one's property is what actually helps to propel that which is best in culture: "Private property in a market framework provides one way to avoid a deadening standard in shaping the boundaries of privacy. This is why a market economy can enhance individuality, self-determination, and dignity, at



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least for those who do well in it.”

Lanier holds out hope for the human spirit overcoming the thin, flat world that looms and threatens at present, but his solution is drastic:

A common rationalization in the fledgling world of digital culture back then [the early 1990s] was that we were entering a transitional lull before a creative storm — or we were already in the eye of one. But the sad truth is that we were not passing through a momentary lull before the storm. We had instead entered a persistent somnolence, and I have come to believe that we will only escape it when we kill the hive [p. 128].

Regrettably, Lanier’s *Manifesto* is weakest where it stands in greatest need of a strong voice and vision. Throughout the first part of his work, his view of humanity is what he terms “mystical” — but as he reaches the final section of *You Are Not a Gadget*, his point of view undergoes a transition: “When I put on a different hat — that of a collaborator with scientists — then I believe something else. In those cases, I prefer ideas that don’t involve magical objects, for scientists can study people as if we were not magical at all” (p. 154). Yes, but such study is intrinsically imperfect, as Lanier has already demonstrated. If what is at stake in the current crisis is that which is inherently spiritual in mankind, Lanier’s sudden transition to a two-fold truth that employs essentially contradictory visions of the nature of man is less than helpful to his overall argument. In fact, *You Are Not a Gadget* seems, in its remaining chapters, to end with a whimper, rather than a bang, wandering in the midst of an exploration of the source and nature of human consciousness. But scientific speculations about the origins of human consciousness are often artifacts of a set of a priori pronouncements about the fundamental nature of the cosmos, which provide very little to support the high view of human nature and creativity which animates many of Lanier’s concerns.

It is usually in the nature of a manifesto to state the nature of a fundamental cultural problem, and then to propose a solution. Although Lanier offers some very general suggestions in the wake of his insightful analysis of the problems of our present time, the conclusion of *You Are Not a Gadget* does not ultimately deliver on the potential which permeates many of its pages. His identification of the pernicious character of collectivism is correct, and much of his analysis of its influence is tremendously insightful. But how the rising generation will be elevated from the dehumanizing conditions of the “hive mind” deserves a more extended examination.

Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget — A Manifesto*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010) 209 pages, \$24.95, hardcover.



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