AH ANALECTA HERMENEUTICA
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HERMENEUTICS / INSTITUT INTERNATIONAL D'HERMÉNEUTIQUE

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

Schrag Remembrance: Transversality and the Fitting Response in an Age of Technocracy

Majia Nadesan
Arizona State University, USA
ORCID: 0000-0002-2399-5587

Today, as anonymized power exercised through AI systems and large language models threatens to consolidate an unprecedented technological panopticon, the philosophy of embodied and principled communicative praxis developed by Calvin O. Schrag appears not merely relevant but urgent. What follows is both a remembrance and a reconstruction: a reflection on encountering Schrag's thought at Purdue in the early 1990s, and an argument that his concepts of transversal rationality and the "fitting response" offer indispensable resources for confronting technocratic governance in our increasingly post-human moment.

Subjectivity, Embodiment, and Communicative Responsibility

As a graduate student at Purdue, I was intellectually cathected to postmodern critiques of power—particularly the biopolitical analytics of Michel Foucault and the linguistic deconstructions of Jacques Derrida. Foucault's account of disciplinary surveillance and the panopticon illuminated ubiquitous power and modern regimes of normalization.[1] Derrida's reflections on différance and erasure destabilized metaphysical certainties.[2]

[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* trans. Alan Sheridan (Vintage Books, 1979), 209.
[2] Jacque Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 95.

Yet both, in different ways, seemed to decenter subjective agency to such an extent that existential choice and moral responsibility became conceptually attenuated.

I was not prepared to relinquish the reality of agency having grown up working-class in Berkeley during the 1960s and witnessed movements for equality and liberty alongside episodes of arbitrary violence. Political struggle presupposes actors who deliberate, choose, and assume responsibility. What I found in Schrag was neither a regression to metaphysical transcendentals nor an embrace of postmodern alterity and fragmentation. Rather, I encountered a reconstructive philosophy of praxis in which subjectivity is constituted communicatively yet remains ethically accountable.

In *The Self after Postmodernity*, Schrag describes the self not as a foundational substance but as an "event of temporalization"—emergent within the interplay of narrative memory, anticipation, and embodied action.[3] Subjectivity is neither sovereign nor dissolved; it is achieved within communicative engagement. The self is formed through responsiveness to others. Agency is neither absolute nor illusory. It is relational and enacted.

This emphasis on communicative responsibility becomes especially salient today, as power operates remotely through algorithmic infrastructures that facilitate centralization, anonymization and automation of decision-making. Think, for example, of the battle between the AI industry firm Anthropic and the U.S. Department of Defense over use of AI for domestic surveillance and automated warfare.[4] Unlike Anthropic's balk, OpenAI is waiting in line for its opportunity to partner with DoD and quite open to dispensing with "guardrails."[5]

Technicism, the metaphysical and deeply material elevation of untrammeled technical reason, threatens the social commons existentially. Anonymous expertise is elevated in key decision-making over "lay people" perceptions and concerns. Automation is ubiquitous. Social systems are fragmented and public recourse to technological externalities limited. The erosion of communicative accountability threatens not only politics, but agentive selfhood and the communities that sustain it.

---

[3] Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self After Postmodernity* (Yale University Press, 1995), 37.

[4] Amrith Ramkumar "Trump Administration Shuns Anthropic, Embraces OpenAI in Clash Over Guardrails: OpenAI chief says deal for Pentagon to use its tools in classified settings includes the same prohibitions that Anthropic had wanted," *The Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 27, 2026, https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/trump-will-end-government-use-of-anthropics-ai-models-ff3550d9?st=8Gm6tM&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink

[5] Ramkumar, "Trump Administration Shuns Anthropic"

The Universalization of Technique: Technocracy Emerging

The erosion of communicative accountability is a symptom and effect of increasingly self-referential, or autopoietic, social systems, as described by Niklas Luhmann.[6] As elaborated upon by Jurgen Habermas, the abstracted medium of instrumental reason colonizes other systems as its binary logic precludes recognition and understanding of non-self values and lifeways:

> The rationalization of the lifeworld makes possible the emergence and growth of subsystems whose independent imperatives turn back destructively upon the lifeworld itself.[7]

In line with these thinkers, Schrag warned against the epistemic reduction of knowledge to instrumentality, what he termed the "universalization of technique into technicism":

> When theoretical knowledge is reduced to a calculus of quantification in which it is only the anticipation of objectified results that guides the procedures, we witness the intrusion of technicism into the epistemic domain of *theōria*. When the sphere of human action and the practices of human agents are reduced to a composite of feedback control mechanisms in the service of a program of social engineering, we witness the intrusion of technicism into the sphere of praxis and *phronēsis*.[8]

When theoretical knowledge is reduced to quantification and predictive calculus, the sphere of theōria becomes subordinated to instrumental control. When praxis is reconceived as feedback regulation within systems of social engineering, *phronēsis* is displaced by optimization.

This diagnosis anticipates contemporary developments with striking clarity. Big data modeling and predictive analytics increasingly mediate governance at institutional and household levels. AI systems filter information, moderate speech, profile behavior, and nudge conduct. Administrative rationality is recoded into algorithmic procedure. Decision-making migrates from deliberative forums to opaque

---

[6] Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz and Dirk Becker (Stanford University Press, 1984), 89.
[7] Jurgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action Volume Two: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Beacon Press, 1987), 186.
[8] Calvin O. Schrag, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 20.

computational architectures. In this milieu, AI and other forms of automation and social engineering end up deployed without transparency or human accountability.

Unremitting systems colonization risks dystopic technocracy. Technocracy, as described by Miguel Angel Centeno, is not primarily an ideology but a mentality—a cognitive framework that shapes how problems are defined and solutions generated.[9] Its operative criteria are efficiency, manageability, and measurable outcomes. What falls outside quantifiable parameters is rendered marginal or unintelligible. More recently, Yanis Varoufakis has argued in *Techno-Feudalism* that digital platforms and algorithmic infrastructures are transforming liberal capitalism into a new hierarchical order structured by data extraction and infrastructural control.[10] Whether or not one accepts the "feudal" analogy, the structural shift is undeniable: power is increasingly abstracted, infrastructural and anonymized, rather than overtly sovereign.

The result resembles a panopticon without a visible guard, without responsibility or accountability. Surveillance technologies accumulate data across domains of life. Algorithmic systems censor, classify, and prioritize without transparent justification. Large language models generate hyperreal content in a manner evocative of Jean Baudrillard's simulacra—signs untethered from stable referents.[11]

Within this technocratic regime, human beings become serialized as data points: behavioral traces parsed into predictive probabilities, stabilized into profiles, monetized as recommendation vectors, and governed as risk classifications. Lifeworld is colonized by system to a degree that even earlier critical theorists such as Habermas and Luhmann could scarcely have imagined. Yet, what is most troubling is not merely surveillance or automation. It is the erosion of communicative answerability. Decisions emerge from distributed networks whose agents—designers, engineers, institutions—are shielded by technical opacity. Agency becomes infrastructural. Responsibility diffuses. Technocratic systems' erasure of humans through their transfiguration into data points and behavioral vectors presents troubling possibilities for representing and controlling social life.

---

[9] Miguel Angel Centeno, "The New Leviathan: The Dynamics and Limits of Technocracy," *Theory and Society*, 22 (1993): 307-335.

[10] Yanis Varoufakis, *Techno-Feudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (Melville House, 2023).

[11] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan, 1994), 1.

Technocratic Closure and Autopoietic Reduction

Technocratic systems increasingly resemble autopoietic communicative orders, processing inputs according to narrow operational codes: measurable/non-measurable, optimized/suboptimal, compliant/non-compliant. Value is translated into metric. Ethics becomes compliance. Politics becomes performance indicator.

Niklas Luhmann's theory of observing but decoupled systems increasingly resonates as communication itself is reduced to coded information transfer in closed autopoietic systems: External events—such as the collapse of privacy—are registered by observing systems but cannot be communicated across them unless they are translatable, for example, into legal forms through claims, cases, statutes, precedents, etc. . . .[12] However, in response to Luhmann's autopoietic model, the humanist tradition has long countered that decoupled systems are never truly autonomous and what is required is a form of communicative action mediating differentiation.[13]

Schrag innovates and elaborates upon communicative praxis, as involving a shared social space textured by embodiment, motivation, decision, and social responsibility. With Habermas, Schrag argues that communication is not mere relay; it is actional, relational, and normatively charged. Technocratic closure (systems colonization) arises when this textured communicative space is flattened into data flow. The result is a disembodied rationality incapable of responding to ethical claims except by re-encoding them into system-compatible variables.

Transversal Rationality: Convergence Without Coincidence

Communicative praxis is tricky to theorize because it must mediate systems and also be responsive to its textured embodiment and social embeddedness. In *The Self After Postmodernity*, Schrag articulates transversal rationality as an alternative to both foundational unity of a universalizing code on the one hand, and postmodern dispersal and alterity on the other. It seeks "convergence without coincidence, conjunction without concordance."[14] That formulation is especially powerful when applied to a fitting communication response to untoward technocratic governance.

Transversality acknowledges differentiated discourses—science, law, ethics, technology, politics—without collapsing them into a single code. It resists the

[12] Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 34-36.
[13] Habermas, *Theory of Communication Action*, 399.
[14] Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity*, 148.

modernist temptation to impose impermeable unity (e.g., a single narrative), and it avoids postmodern resignation to fragmentation and the inability to collaboratively communicate across differences. Instead, it affirms communicative crossings.

Applied to technocracy, transversality means that technical rationality cannot claim self-sufficiency. Technicist demands to efficiency and commercial viability cannot be elevated over other value orientations. Optimization must remain answerable to ethical discourse. Efficiency must remain interrogable by democratic deliberation. Predictive modeling must remain open to experiential critique. Transversal communication re-opens discursive boundaries that technicism seeks to close. It does not deny expertise; it situates expertise within a broader field of communicative accountability.

Incorporating diverse publics in economic and infrastructural decision-making presents real-world procedural challenges, but these have long-been explored with clearly marked paths for expanded accountability and inclusion. These possibilities promise alternatives to dystopic technocracies but require ethical transversal communications. They require a fitting response.

The Ethics of the Fitting Response

Schrag's concept of the "fitting response" deepens this critique.[15] Ethics, in his formulation, is not primarily about attaching value predicates to a moral subject. It concerns responsiveness arising from communicative interaction. The moral self is constituted in answering the claims of others.

As Schrag explains in *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*, the fitting response:

> places us in the proximity of the *ethos* of our communicative praxis, and invites us to assume a posture toward the patterns of comportment which inform our thought and action. The question points us to the patterns of obligations that arise from our interactions with other selves, interactions which we have seen are constitutive of selfhood. It directs us to the requirement of responsiveness, without which the very notion of a moral self and a moral character would have no meaning. The language of morality is

[15] Schrag, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*, 202.

> the language of responsiveness and responsibility, and if there is to be talk of 'an ethics' in all this it will need to be an ethics of the fitting response."[16]

Communication cannot escape responsibility and a fitting response acknowledges the "ethical requirement within the space of ethos."[17]

Technocratic governance, by contrast, often replaces responsiveness with procedural compliance. Decisions are justified by reference to models, benchmarks, or "best available evidence." While evidence matters, it does not exhaust moral reasoning. A fitting response requires contextual judgment—*phronēsis*—sensitive to texture, history, and relational obligation.

To demand a fitting response from technocratic systems is to insist that they remain communicatively answerable. This entails:

- Traceable decision pathways
- Identifiable loci of responsibility (designers, deployers, institutions)
- Normative auditability beyond technical validation
- Institutionalized channels for contestation and revision

The fitting response thus becomes both an ethical stance and an institutional design principle.

The demand for more democratic and social accountability in technological innovation is not new but previous scholarship rarely has engaged with the critical role of communication and the ethical demands of a fitting response to technological aporias presented by new technologies, such as AI. Perhaps this literature assimilated the postmodern views of autonomous, decentered agency when describing technological developments and reason, thereby impinging upon efforts to conceptualize embodied agencies and communication responsibilities.

Reconstituting Embodied Agency

The deepest danger of technocracy is existential. When selves are reduced to data profiles, their idem-identities (measurable sameness over time) are stabilized through predictive classification rather than dialogic engagement.[18] Agency becomes reactive,

---

[16] Ibid., 204.
[17] Ibid., 202.
[18] Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity*, 35.

shaped by nudges and curated feeds. Life-defining decision-making, such as decisions executed in warfare, becomes automated. Life itself faces erasure by disembodied agency.

Schrag's communicative praxis re-inscribes embodiment and relationality. The self is not a node in a network but an event of temporalization enacted in responsive engagement. To preserve such subjectivity requires restoring spaces of dialogic interaction not fully mediated by algorithmic filtering. It also requires acknowledging the inescapable responsibility of abstracted social systems to the lifeworld and its constituents. For-profit enterprises and government bureaucracies must be responsive to impacts and expressed concerns of organic, embodied communities. At a more practical level, incorporating communicative praxis might require:

- Democratic input into technological design norms
- Participatory governance mechanisms for technological innovation, such as AI
- Public oversight boards with genuine authority
- Transparency (e.g., model documentation and explainability standards and decision-criteria)
- Institutional responsiveness and commitments to contestability

Although requiring changes in legal codes, these measures are not merely regulatory. They are transversal forms of communicative praxis that must be acknowledged across systems as non-negotiable. They are non-negotiable because they create spaces where claims can be articulated and answered. These spaces enable competing value frameworks and narrations of the future to be expressed, representing the range of human experiences and forms of agency.

Reconstruction, Not Nostalgia

Schrag's philosophy is neither nostalgic for metaphysical foundations nor fatalistic about fragmentation. It is reconstructive. It affirms that rationality survives the demise of foundationalism, provided it is understood transversally and enacted communicatively.

The challenge today is not to reject technology but to resist technicism—the colonization of all domains by instrumental logic. Transversal rationality and the ethics of the fitting response offer conceptual resources for reconstituting agency within technological infrastructures rather than outside them. If technocracy diffuses agency

into systems, Schrag recalls us to accountable speech and embodied action. If algorithms obscure levers of power, the fitting response demands answerability. If communication is reduced to data transmission, communicative praxis restores its texture. In this sense, Schrag's work is indeed hopeful—not because it promises easy solutions, but because it preserves the possibility of responsible agency amid systemic complexity.

Today, Schrag's intellectual and personal legacy continue to inspire hope for navigating increasingly autonomous systems. Growing alienation requires a fitting response of renewed social dialogue and forums for representing, debating, and participating in rapid social-technological change. Schrag's legacy promises possibilities that transverse the alienation and existential crisis of technicism.