

# **TECHNOCRACY, INSTINCT OF WORKMANSHIP AND AUTHORITY OF PROCEDURES IN THE RESTORATION OF PRAGUE'S TROLLEYBUSES.**

EGOR MULEEV \*

*Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Schnongauerstr. 9, 04328 Leipzig, Germany*

*\* corresponding author: e\_muleev@leibniz-ifl.de*

---

## 1. Introduction

The research for this contribution was prompted by the following question. If the management of public transport relies on technical knowledge, does it deserve to be called technocratic? For the tekhne, I draw on Thorsten Veblen's theoretical justification of the difference between engineers and financiers. For the kratos, I attract the anarchist critique of authority. This contribution argues that the epistemic superiority of a particular knowledge lies in the procedures of bureaucratically organised knowledge production. Empirical observations from the reopening of the trolleybus system in Prague show that the decision-making process was influenced by more than a century of tradition in building and maintaining transport systems and was supported by the available procedures.

## 2. Technocracy

The earliest documented use of the term "technocracy" clearly refers to issues of industrial management [1], while its contemporary understanding tends to avoid it. This term has a very straightforward definition nowadays, understood as the power of experts. It means that the knowledge produced by experts has an epistemic superiority over other types of approaches to the same questions. In two very recent publications on the issue, Andres Esmark [2] claims that technocracy manifests a specific type of rationality, while Jeffrey Friedman [3] takes a less straightforward position. He introduces "citizen technocrats" and argues that government-friendly experts share the same esoteric type of knowledge. Neither thinker, however, went very far into the question of technical control over the industry and the question of authority, even though it is the combination of these two words that defines the term.

## 3. Technology

Veblen's perspective on technical control over the industry is primarily based on three theoretical arguments [4; 5]. The first one posits that curiosity and creativity are integral and inextricable aspects of human nature. Technological development and progress can be seen as an outcome of this intrinsic feature. This perspective enables Veblen to regard technology as a public good rather than as a privately owned commodity.

The second argument presents a clear anti-capitalist excitement. The understanding of efficiency as a commercial success contaminates the process of industrial production. It substitutes the need and ability to satisfy the demand of the general public with the peculiar gain of "captains of industry." Consequently, the potential of technology to foster prosperity is significantly constrained. The technical understanding of efficiency suggests the liberation of the engineer's logic in the mechanical organisation of production.

The third argument put forth is the necessity for collective decision-making. Veblen argued for the Soviet of technicians, the voluntary union of "competent" people. Some authors [6] contend that Veblen was sympathetic to the anarcho-syndicalist movement, which espouses a non-authoritarian and horizontal type of industrial management.

#### 4. Power

As Mariya Rakhmaninova [7] notes, the justification of power in Western knowledge can be traced back to ancient and Christian metaphysical traditions. Michael Huemer [8] presents a more straightforward argument, suggesting that the authority of government is ultimately an illusion because the available explanations are insufficient to explain it.

A left-wing intersectional approach reveals the expressions of privileges situated within specific contexts, disseminated according to the inherited institutions of hierarchically organised societies. Privileges, frames of reference, patterns of daily living and associated forms of epistemic superiority are expressed in hierarchies [7]. Metaphysical illusions, stereotypes and assumptions can thus be seen as expressions of fantasies that are structured by executive mechanisms. There are a plethora of ways to conceptualise the future. However, a clear distinction is often made between one particular style of conduct and all others.

The methods employed to address social concerns tend to be characterised by a high degree of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is understood as a technical approach to money redistribution through the set of procedures. Bureaucracy is responsible for designing markets and establishing the principles that regulate the implementation of specific agendas. Epistemic superiority lies therefore in the bureaucratically sanctioned procedures of knowledge production which constitute the ability to dream about the future. Ultimately, esoteric epistocracy [3], the metaphysics of authority [7] and the animistic contamination of instincts [6] demonstrate that contemporary experts occupy a comparable position in society to that of shamans and oracles during the era of savagery.

#### 5. Fieldwork

The fieldwork conducted Prague in spring 2024 aims to answer the question of the knowledge used to implement the decision on the restoration of trolleybus service. I spent 16 days in the city, riding buses, visiting transport museums, and talking to public transport professionals, activists, planners, industry representatives, and academics. An empirical argument is that the reopening has its roots in the tradition (of workmanship) of Czech electrical engineering, which has been carefully maintained in the course of decades.

The production of electrical infrastructure and planning capabilities have been inherited and successfully preserved in the Czech Republic since the middle of XIX century. After the Velvet Revolution there has been a notable absence of infrastructure development that would facilitate the use of cars and simultaneously the development of public transport. One potential explanation of such an unusual actions is that the reforms were "right-wing in rhetoric with left-wing practice" [9]. Secondly, the governance reform of public transport did not result in the transfer of all responsibilities for service provision from operator company DPP to the contractor PID. Also the

establishment of self-governance in 56 districts across the city helped DPP to celebrate a city-wide influence. A third aspect is the stance mentioned by numerous respondents with whom I spoke. The trolleybus was dismantled by the communist regime; therefore, it is imperative that it be rebuilt.

Electrification of a bus fleet in Prague initiated from the internally financed experimentation. The DPP possessed the requisite capabilities to plan, construct, and operate the system independently and after test rides, they applied for the external finding with a very clear understanding what kind of technical specifications they demand. Success of the test operation was not the type of marketing research, but rather the technical one, aiming to get the maximum out of the existing infrastructure.

The tradition of over a century in the production of various vehicles and the management of public transport had a great influence on the restoration of the trolleybus system in Prague. Furthermore, despite the political and social changes that have occurred over the course of decades, there has been a continuity in engineering knowledge tradition. The organisational structure and procedures are also of relevance in this context, namely the structure of governance, finance, and distribution of responsibilities.

## 6. Conclusions

The objective of these epistemic properties is to construct a future and implement measures to make it a reality. Technocracy, as a response to social problems and as a fundamentally epistemic project [3], is inextricably linked to the bureaucratic structures of execution and imagination associated with this vision. The restoration of trolleybuses in Prague demonstrates that the implementation of established procedures does not necessarily result in the exclusive manifestation of the executive power of accountants. Furthermore, there is room for manoeuvre for engineers.

The main reason for Prague's trolleybus restoration is that the fantasies of engineers celebrate the availability of procedures that make the dream come true. Therefore, the restoration can be considered a matter of maintaining tradition. It can be argued that care is the most crucial component in ensuring the continuity of such an incentive.

From this perspective, sustainability can be conceptualised as a bottom-up phenomenon, constituted by local knowledge, tradition and, arguably, aspirations for the future. It is therefore evident that the capacity for workmanship is inherent to each individual within a community, and the mobilisation of this capacity represents a pivotal step in the direction of enhancing publicly-owned transport systems on a global scale.

## Acknowledgements

This article presents research conducted as part of the CoMoDe project, which received funding from the Leibniz Competition research and innovation programme of the Leibniz Association (grant number J86/2019).

## References

- [1] D. R. Stabile. Veblen and the Political Economy of the Engineer: The Radical Thinker and Engineering Leaders Came to Technocratic Ideas at the Same Time. *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 45(1): 41-52, 1986.
- [2] A. Esmark. *The New Technocracy*. Bristol University Press, 2020.
- [3] J. Friedman. *Power without knowledge*. Oxford University Press, 2019.
- [4] T. Veblen. *The instinct of workmanship and the state of industrial arts*. Transaction Publishers, 1990.
- [5] T. Veblen. *The Engineers and the Price System*. Batoche Books, 2001.
- [6] M. Perelman. Thorstein Veblen: An American Economic Perspective. In M. Hudson & A. Öncü (Eds.), *Absentee Ownership and its Discontents*, 1-19, Islet, 2016.
- [7] M. Rakhmaninova. *Vlast' i Telo*. Radikalnaya Teoriya i Praktika, 2020.
- [8] M. Huemer. *The Problem of Political Authority*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012
- [9] Ž. Libor. *From central planning to the market. The transformation of the Czech economy, 1989-2004*. CEU Press, 2017.