

### **Brother, can you spare an erg?**

After the speculative house of cards upon which the post-World War One economy was based crashed in October 1929, the world spiraled into an economic slump so severe it came to be called The Great Depression. There are numbers to quantify how desperate the situation had become by June of 1932; like how the worldwide Gross Domestic Product fell 15% since the Crash. Or how almost one out of four Americans were unemployed. Or that the stock market's industrial average dropped from a high of 524 to a dismal 58.

Those are just numbers, woefully inadequate to describe the personal misery and fear sweeping the people of this country as factories and businesses closed, banks tottered on collapse and crops in the Midwest withered from an unprecedented heat wave. Nothing was working the way it should. To many it felt like the very foundation upon which they had built their lives was crumbling like the dust which swirled unmercifully across the Plains. The upcoming presidential election in November provided some hope to an anxious country, but even if the Democrats were to win and unseat Republican Herbert Hoover, the sitting president, his successors' inauguration would not take place until March 1933, almost a year away.

History is filled with stories of people who seem to pop up out of nowhere at precipitous times. Such is the case of Howard Scott in 1932. Scott liked to call himself an engineer but, in fact, he had never earned any degree higher than a high school diploma. He didn't really have any engineering experience, either, unless one counted being on a cement-pouring gang for a dam project. What Scott did have was an inquisitive mind and a streak of self-promotion which would have made P.T. Barnum blush.

It was 1919 and Scott had left the cement gang to sell his own brew of floor wax. When not waxing the floors of prospective customers Scott was also working as a researcher for the Industrial Workers of the World on the problem of waste in the world. Pretty ambitious for someone with no formal engineering or economics training. (This ambition could be attributed to the heady times in which Scott lived. Only two years earlier the Russian Revolution dramatically demonstrated how individuals could create country-changing movements. Here in America, 1920 would herald the beginning of universal suffrage and prohibition, two movements started by individuals with oversized ambition.)

For Scott, the tumblers would click into place when he picked up a book written by economist and sociologist Thorsten Veblen. Veblen is best remembered for coining the phrase "conspicuous consumption," defined as the spending of more money on goods than they are worth. Veblen's theories galvanized the 29-year-old into action. Scott reached out to Veblen and together they formed a new organization called The Technical Alliance. Scott brought to the Alliance a passion for the burgeoning field of efficiency in business. Veblen brought a gravitas which lured a dozen or so academics into the fold. (One of the early members was Henry Gantt, a pioneer in the development of scientific management who created the Gantt chart, a method still used today for the efficient planning of projects.) The basic tenant of the Technical Alliance

was that engineers should run the world. Only by employing fact-based engineer-run efficiency – which they now dubbed “Technocracy” – could the world achieve utopia.

Scott and the Alliance had a lot to say, but Americans in the 1920s weren’t listening. Certainly not to the radical ideas of social and economic engineering the Alliance was promoting. They were too busy enjoying what Fitzgerald called “The Jazz Age” until the hedonistic bubble of stock speculation, fueled by illegal gin, burst in late 1929. Suddenly, introspection was in vogue. But the Technical Alliance wasn’t around to lead the discussion. It had disbanded from disinterest five years earlier.

In 1932 Scott had formed a new organization with an even more influential partner, Walter Rautenstrauch. He was chairman of Columbia University’s Department of Industrial Engineering. Calling itself The Committee on Technocracy, it counted among its members Columbia president Nicholas Murray Butler. On June 16<sup>th</sup>, as banks closed and crops withered in Midwest fields, the influential New York Times published a story on the group and its proposal that engineers run the world. It didn’t seem to matter that Herbert Hoover - the president in whose term the depression had become Great - was himself an engineer. In those dark days of 1932 the hope of an engineer-run society solving the country’s problems spread like wildfire.



*Howard Scott in 1942*

With the gravitas provided by the Times and an Ivy-League school, the Technocracy movement took off. The utopia promised by Scott and his fellow engineers caused a sensation throughout a country desperate for answers to the grim economic situation. Like so many fads it began to take on a life of its own. Technocracy clubs began to form all over America. The Literary Digest would explain later that year "...Technocracy is all the rage. All over the country it is being talked about, explained, wondered at, raised, damned..."



*Josephine County, Oregon, August 1939*

Despite the growing mania for Technocracy and its vision of an engineer-run society almost 39 million citizens showed enough faith in the existing system to cast their vote for President in November. Democrat Franklin Roosevelt beat the engineer, Hoover, capturing almost 23 million votes. Now all the country had to do was wait until March 4<sup>th</sup> for the new president to take over. Four months is a long time to wait, especially when almost 25% of the work force - 13 million people - are unemployed.

America's affair with Technocracy reached its height during this, Hoover's "lame duck" period. The Committee published a pamphlet titled "Introduction to Technocracy" in which Scott contended that instead of dollars and cents, individual output should be valued in ergs and joules

(the engineering units used to measure expended energy.) Writer Harold Loeb, acting as Public Relations manager, saw to the placement of hundreds of articles in local and national publications extolling an irresistibly fair, efficient, Technocratic world in which no one would have work more than a four-hours a day, and for only four days a week.

### TECHNOCRACY CALENDAR

Day of Year	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96
Group I .....	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	□	□	□	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	□	□	□	⊙	⊙
Group II .....	□	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	□	□	□	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	□	□	□	⊙
Group III .....	□	□	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	□	□	□	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	□	□	□
Group IV .....	□	□	□	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	□	□	□	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	□	□
Group V .....	⊙	□	□	□	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	□	□	□	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	□
Group VI .....	⊙	⊙	□	□	□	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	□	□	□	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Group VII .....	⊙	⊙	⊙	□	□	□	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	□	□	□	⊙	⊙	⊙

*From a later publication on Technocracy; bullseyes represent workdays and squares are days off.*

By late 1932 almost a quarter of a million people had joined one of hundreds of local Technocracy clubs. Howard Scott may have been the most sought-after speaker in the country – even more so than the president-elect. From the hustings the cry went out for him to rally his Technocratic followers. He gave into the public's clamor and agreed to give a speech on a nationwide radio hookup on January 13. It was an utter disaster. As Howard Segal wrote in his 2005 book *Technological Utopianism in American Culture*, Scott's speech was "a rambling, confusing and uninspiring address on a well-publicized nationwide radio hookup. The ill-fated speech hardly helped the cause..." It was so bad that some embarrassed Alliance members would claim Scott had been drugged by enemies who wished to see him discredited.

The speech occurred just as details of precisely how a Technocratic society would operate were made public. Technocracy's rigid, unforgiving set of rules revealed it to be nothing better than a dictatorship, one where engineers took the place of fascists. Of the plan, Archibald MacLeish wrote "Nothing is required of man but that he should submit to the laws of physics, measure his life in ergs and discard all interests which cannot be expressed in foot pounds per second." With the inauguration of FDR now just a couple of months away, nationwide enthusiasm for the movement.

A simmering schism cleaved the Technocracy movement in two. As Beverly Burris wrote in her 1993 book *Technocracy at Work*, "Two separate groups formed: The Continental Committee on Technocracy, centered around Harold Loeb, a novelist; and Technocracy, Inc., centered around Scott. The continental Committee, more concerned with national organizing, claimed 250,000 members in seventy locals by May 1933. Technocracy, Inc., featured a uniform, consisting of a

‘well-tailored double-breasted suit, gray shirt, and blue necktie, with a monad insignia on the lapel.’; its members even saluted Scott in public.”

The Technocracy Movement, now a house divided against itself, withered. It would never achieve the following it had during those dark days of the Hoover lame duck period. Like Esperanto, Baconism, Whist and other crazes with which Americans occasionally become enamored, the Technocracy movement became emblematic of a past time, rather than a force for today. At the height of frenzy, W.C. Fields shot a film in which a child asked him, "Daddy, what's Technocracy?" The film was released soon after Roosevelt had been sworn in, by which time the public's interest had turned from Scott's engineering utopia to FDR's New Deal.

Technocracy, the wave of the future, was already an anachronism. Thankfully our country's belief in democracy was not.