

Babel – the city of man and the technological paradox. The Jacques Ellul view.

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In Genesis 11.1-32, we find the story of man, using technology to build Babel, in an attempt to become self-sufficient in the search for transcending human limitations. It is an opportunity to discuss the place of technological development in the cultural mandate of God. Jacques Ellul's interpretation of this passage in his work "The Meaning of the city" has influenced many researchers, notably some Christians who produced a series of criticism to western technology. Is it possible for the city and technology to be redeemed?

1) Ellul's place in philosophy and sociology of technology

I will approach Jaques Ellul's work from the point of view of a historian and technology philosopher, however still considering Ellul's own interests, that is, sociological and theological.

"The meaning of the city" (Ellul and Pardee 2011) is core to our theme here; written in 1951 (but only published in 1970 in English and 1975 in French), it is a theological counterpoint to the "Technological Society" (Ellul 1964). Ellul examined the meaning of the city throughout several biblical contexts and the progress of Yaweh's revelation, from the first builders to the culmination of the New City of Jerusalem, which unveils in the book of Revelations.

However, in "Technological Society", from 1954, the sociologist criticized the earthly city, which, for him, is consecrated to Satan, as opposed to the city of God. The invention of the City, a technical invention in itself, brings problems that are apparently only solvable through technique. For example, the pollution generated by the city should be solved by technological inventions.

In fact, throughout the interwar period, the notion of everlasting progress stumbled and gave place to a pessimistic view of technology. This idea was highlighted towards the end of World War II, for Europe had gone through two wars, scientific conceptions had been used to justify the racist ideology of Nazism, and through technology, the atomic bomb had been produced. All of that mined the confidence on the world becoming a better place through scientific and technological development. This may help explaining the predominance of pessimistic themes both in literature

(such as “Brave New World” and “1984”) and in art (such as Francis Bacon’s “head VI”, in 1949).

Besides, an apprehension towards environmental matters soared. Examples such as DDT, which the first modern pesticide, efficient in the short term, but harmful to the human health (Ellul 1964, 109), other chemical products, oil or radiation leakages, compounds that were possibly carcinogenic and toxic waste aroused neo-luddist sentiments (Sale 1996). Jacques Ellul may echo very well the spirit of this period, which was critical to the consequences of technological growth.

Even so, despite his criticism, Ellul departs from the extreme luddists or anti-technologists. As the author himself affirms:

“I have already said that the works of human beings are used by God to build the New Jerusalem. The book of Revelations says that the glory of nations will enter the New Jerusalem. The glory of nations also includes technique. Hence, our attitude is not antitechnical; rather, it is a critical acceptance of technique.” (Ellul and Vanderburg 2004).

For Ellul, technique is self-standing and deterministic, in the sense that there is no freedom of choice, since technique doesn’t rely on moral values, and its advance is continuous and relentless (Ellul 1964). For a technological determinist, “technology causes or determines the structure of the rest of society and culture” (Dusek 2006, 84; Scharff and Dusek 2014).

In his many works, Jacques Ellul insists that technology carries along its own effects, despite the way it is used. It is not only a matter of intentions. Technological development is not good or evil, or even neutral. People become conditioned by their technological systems. Regardless of the belief that technologies are good or evil, they will continue their course doing what they always do: subduing humanity. For Ellul, technologies consist a new kind of cultural system that restructures the social world completely as a controllable object.

2) The meaning of the Babel City.

Two of the authors who influenced Ellul the most regarding his ideas towards the city were Joseph Comblin and Lewis Mumford. Theologian Comblin wrote *Théologie de la Ville*, in 1968 and Mumford wrote “The culture of cities” (1938) and “The city in history” (1961), works in which the general tone is pessimist, yet

foreseeing urbanistic solutions as positive, organically integrating people and living spaces.

Ellul's biblical view is paired with Karl Barth's, whose concept of dialectic, in turn borrowed from Kierkegaard, presupposes that every theological affirmation is also paradoxical, unable to be synthesized. God is hidden and reveals Himself, the man is justified through Christ, but is still a sinner. We can also, together with Ellul, affirm that the city is a human construction, fallen, yet fostered by God (Gill 1982).

Analyzing "The meaning of the city" we can point out that its purpose is to find a doctrine of the city, implying that there was a harmonious teaching throughout the Scriptures about it. The work is composed of 6 chapters, spanning an analysis of cities from Genesis to Revelation. The part that concerns us here is "Nimrod", which is in the first chapter "The builders". One of the first cities built in the Bible is Babel/Babylon by Nimrod. In Genesis 10: 8-10 we can find the political and spiritual beginning of Babel. Nimrod is the founder of his growing aggressive empire. His power makes him known in Israel. As the center of his Empire he founded the great city of Babel (10.10). Not without irony, the name Nimrod means "we will rebel".

Ellul proposes another translation to the term "hunter", that appears related to Nimrod, using "plunderer" or "conqueror" instead. Thus, different parts of the character Nimrod emerge, a mighty conqueror before the Lord. The construction of Babylon and Nineveh points to the fact that conqueror and builder are no longer distinct. "Both are included in one man, and both are an expression of that desire for might which is revolt against the Lord." (Ellul and Pardee 2011, 13).

After that, we get to the passage of Genesis 11, the narrative of the construction of the tower of Babel. Here, the rebellious people want to make a name for themselves, which means to become independent from God, to become autonomous. In this point we have to stress that Ellul and other scholars as Egbert Schuurman understand Babel and Babylon as representing the same city, a view that is not unanimous (Hiebert 2007, 7).

For Ellul, the Babellian rebellion is deeper than Prometheus myth, to which it is often compared. It is more than taking power from God, it is a wish to exclude God from his creation. And where else could the modern man declare with impunity that he is the master of nature? "It is only in an urban civilization that man has the metaphysical possibility of saying 'I killed God'" (Ellul and Pardee 2011, 16).

In the city, man builds structures that projects him from the forces of nature. In fact, the search for nature's control through technology could be related to a religious search, the same way magic could be used to undertake natural elements (Ellul 1964, 24). Therefore, the city as a place of excellence, where technology prospers, becomes the place where man feels self-sufficient and able to control nature.

However, this demand for control results in the control of men over men. This is the consequence of the building of cities according to Ellul (Ellul and Pardee 2011, 61). C. S. Lewis, despite being more optimistic, also denotes that "what we call Man's power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men, with Nature as a instrument" (Lewis 2012, chap. 3)¹

Finally, for Ellul, Babylon is The City in the Bible. The same words that are used for Babylon are used for Rome in Revelations. Based on Rev. 16: 18-19 Ellul comments that Babylon the great city, and *all the cities*, are wiped out. Thus, the name "Babylon" must be understood spiritually. For Ellul, the great city is the agent of war, it is inseparably connected with money, and it intends to be autonomous: "if the desert is the place of demons, the city is the place of idols." (Ellul and Pardee 2011, 54).

And for him, in a very pessimistic view,

"The city cannot be reformed. (...)in spite of all the efforts of men of good will, in spite of all those who have tried to make the cities more human, they are still formed of iron, steel, glass, and cement. The garden city. The show city. The brilliant city... they are all cities of death made of dead things, condemned to death, and nothing can alter this fact." (Ellul and Pardee 2011, 57).

However, apart from that search of autonomy from God, there is some hope for the city of man, according to Ellul. Man should seek for peace in the city through the Church, that is, through the Word of God. Only through the reconciliation of the City with the Word could the reduction of violence, pollution, stress take place, although never fully appeased. So there is no hope of salvation in the self-sufficient spirit of man, if not by surrender.

For God loves Jerusalem not as man's work, but as object of his election. The city must serve as witness of this for the other cities so they may say with the

¹ Unfortunately there are no records of intellectual exchange between Ellul and Lewis; both of whom were contemporaries (he lived from 1912 to 1997 this from 1898 to 1963), and developed interesting arguments about Western technological development and its ambiguities, especially the aftermath of World War II.

psalmist: “As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts” (Ps 48:8) (Ellul and Pardee 2011, 107).

Ellul supports that Revelation’s new Jerusalem is a sample of God fostering human creation. Starting in a garden, man has transformed the world, building cities. “The new Jerusalem is to be established at the end of time, but absolutely not by any human effort. She is the creation of God” (Ellul and Pardee 2011, 163).

If the biblical prescriptive is followed, Ellul argues that the city of man may become an anticipation of the earthly Jerusalem, which theologians understand as the “already/not yet”, God’s Kingdom on Earth, that still awaits for its full restoration (Wright 2008). As a theologian, Ellul understands that the apocalyptic hope is the hope in God (Ellul 1977). The same view is expressed by C.S. Lewis, Ellul’s contemporaneous author, for whom there was hope to the human race, but this hope was fixated in religious redemption, instead of a technological or scientific one.

More recently, an author that also establishes a dialogue with Ellul on this matter is Schuurman, one of the most prolific scholars on technology within the reformed Calvinist tradition, influenced by the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd². In 1978 Schuurman published “Reflections on the technological society”, in which he agrees with Ellul on the rejection of technology’s positivist adoration as a neutral tool, through which we could conquer a global society where all human needs will be met by the use of inexhaustible resources of an industrial technological apparatus. For both authors, the causes of the evil derailment of technology in the contemporaneous culture is found in the notion of technological autonomy. Only, as opposed to Ellul, Schuurman argues that autonomy is not inherent in technology, but this is the religious-spiritual assumption of the modern post-medieval man.

Notably, for Ellul the city cannot be reformed, coming into conflict to the dooyeweerdian view. Ellul doesn’t mention neo-calvinist authors in his work, and even affirms to depart from the Calvinist tradition in “Perspectives of our age”.

Final Thoughts:

In Ellul’s vast work, cities are depicted as undertaken by technique, advertisement and politics, and as opposed to God. However, the cities will be redeemed and recreated by God in a future existence; a new City of God. Finally,

² Works that treat cities from the reformed point of view: (Ward 2000; Smith 2004; Zuidervaart 2005; CAVANAUGH 1998).

Ellul's apocalyptic view for the city ends up being a positive one, due to the Christian notion of reconciliation, which points to a future state of peace and harmony, free from the human limitations (Van Vleet 2014, 208–9) (Jacob E. Van Vleet, *Dialectical Theology and Jacques Ellul*, p. 208-209).

The human history starts in a garden and ends in a city: the heavenly Jerusalem coming down from heaven. God took into consideration the work of man.

“The city is the focus of all invention and interchange and art; the city is the birthplace of culture. (...) The city is indeed our primary human creation. It is a uniquely human world. It is the symbol that we have chosen, the place that we have invented and that we prefer.” (Ellul and Bromiley 1989, 219).

Hope should be set upon our cities, our technological apparatus or in technique which is in everything we do; yet, hope should presuppose ethical actions, knowing that through those actions we are announcing that the Kingdom of God is already, but not yet. This way, we can also reduce the pain of life in the technological city.

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