Jacques Ellul, "*La Technique*," and the "Indispensable Liberation of the Person of Our Times"

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Echoing Jesus's high priestly prayer in John 17, Jacques Ellul contended that Christians are called to be "in" this world but not "of" it. By implication, Ellul stressed that Christians need to understand their sociological circumstances for the sake of trying to discern where the possibilities of genuinely redemptive individual and social action lie. Christians are called to be *present*, Ellul believed - i.e., to bear witness to the possibilities of *grace* and *freedom* - at precisely those points of maximum tension between God's redemptive purposes and our sinful world at enmity with God. One of these points, he believed, is modern technological development, something he termed "*La Technique*."

Ellul used the term "technique" to refer to any standardized set of procedures and/or means designed to attain a predetermined result. Techniques thus include what ordinarily are considered technologies, e.g., computers, television, aircraft, etc., but also any number of other features of modern societies not typically deemed technological, e.g., the pervasive use of money and organizational and/or administrative strategies such as bureaucracy. "*La Technique*," Ellul argued, is the sum total of all of these procedures and/or means and their impact upon society and culture. "The Technological Society" is basically one in which so many features of social life have been surrendered to standardized means that virtually every aspect of our civilization now reflects the requirements of technical efficiency.

The essential features of *modern* technology over and against premodern technologies, Ellul stressed, are its "rationality" and "artificiality."[1] Rationality refers to the peculiarly modern determination always to select "the one best means" for achieving the desired result. Under modern conditions, the push to identify "the one best means" is most often driven by monetary

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[1] Robert K. Merton, "Introduction," Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, translated by John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage, 1964), 78-9.

considerations, i.e., the standard operating procedures, "best practices," and/or recommended means are often so prescribed because they are the most cost effective.

The connection between modern technological "rationalization" and the elimination of human individuality has long been observed and lamented, for the modern workplace has been carefully designed and engineered such that tasks are routine and repetitive and workers are readily replaceable. As Peter Berger *et al.* observed in a study entitled *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (1974),[2] workers in the modern workplace are encouraged to think of themselves and of each other as potentially reproducible components within the production process. Workers are conditioned to think of the production process, no matter how concrete the actual products of the process may be, in abstract terms, i.e., as a system analyzable into its constituent steps, procedures, and components, of which they themselves may be listed.[3]

Yet as machinelike as people have managed to become as they have adapted to the systems and machinery that pervade the modern workplace, they are not ultimately able to compete with the machines. The machines are stronger, faster, tireless, more precise, more reliable, and significantly less expensive than human beings. Business and industry have not surprisingly, therefore, been replacing human labor with capital machinery at an ever-increasing rate over the past century and a half. In this connection, economist John Maynard Keynes coined the term "technological unemployment" nearly a century ago to describe the large-scale displacement of people by machinery.[4] And, while it has long been the case that those displaced by machinery have been able – eventually - to find productive and satisfying work, economists are beginning to wonder how long this trend can continue as machines become increasingly

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[2] Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger & Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage, 1974).

[3] Ibid., 27.

[4] John Maynard Keynes, "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren" (http://www.econ.yale.edu/smith/econ116a/keynes1.pdf): 3.

capable of more and more kinds of work.[5] As Brynjolfsson and McAfee report in a work entitled

The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies (2014),

sustained exponential improvements in the speed and capacity of networked computer systems,

the digitization of extraordinarily large amounts of data, and the use of increasingly sophisticated

algorithms to "mine" this data, are yielding technological breakthroughs that will almost

certainly make the stuff of yesterday's science fiction actually possible within the coming years.[6]

As this happens, the displacement of people by machines must inevitably move from the realm of

blue-collar employment to the world of white-collar professions. Ellul put this presciently, if

bluntly, in 1964: "Man must have nothing decisive to perform in the course of technical

operations; after all, he is the source of error."[7]

Ellul also stressed that modern technology is characterized by "artificiality," by which he

meant its propensity both to require as well as to give rise to more and more standardized

procedures, methods, and technical means, until the natural – and human - environment is

completely submerged beneath technical artifice. Technique, Ellul wrote in this connection:

> destroys, eliminates, or subordinates the natural world, and does not allow this
> world to restore itself or even to enter into a symbiotic relation with [technique].
> The two worlds obey different imperatives, different directives, and different laws
> which have nothing in common…. We are rapidly approaching the time when there
> will be no longer any natural environment at all.[8]

Hyperbole aside, Ellul's comments contain an important insight, for modern technology's

penchant for artifice does indeed pose an elemental threat to human formation in the sense that

the technological process tends toward the elimination of the only context within which personal

agency is possible, *viz*. that described by *time* and *place*.

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[5] See Nicholas Carr, *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World from Edison to Google* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 136.

[6] Erik Brynjolfsson & Andrew McAfee, *The Second Machine Age: Work, Progress, and Prosperity in a Time of Brilliant Technologies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 90.

[7] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 136.

[8] Ibid., 79.

The technological society has progressively and relentlessly flattened particular "places" into standardized and more-or-less uniform "spaces" largely for the sake of technical efficiency, but often also to facilitate commerce. Indeed, under the influence of commerce and networked digital technologies, things seem destined to exist only in "the cloud" of so-called cyberspace. Yet as astonishing and as convenient as the world-wide-web may well be, its virtual reality must be a poor substitute the reality requisite for the formation of persons. As William Poteat observed: "When the notion of place is assimilated into that of space... or when place is preempted by space, in this sense the concept of a person falls into grave jeopardy."[9]

Time also has become increasingly alien and inhuman within the technological society. This is particularly true given exponential improvements in computing capacity coupled with digital networks that operate at nearly the speed of light. Time, Poor Richard is supposed to have said, *is* money. Yet the real money is tied to transactional velocity as well as to slight time advantages in the possession of information, insights that have been recently exploited and augmented using networked digital computing technologies. As a result, the fluidity and rapidity with which money now circulates the planet, as well as the volume of this circulation, defies human understanding much less human control.

Yet as philosopher Albert Borgmann has noted, all of this technological perfection must eventually and inevitably dissolve into indeterminacy, for when in the disembodied world of machine intelligence the numbers and kinds of artificial experiences become limitless, then nothing in particular will stand out any more. [10] There will no longer be a "before" and an "after," a "now" and a "then," a "better" and a "worse." The diversity, particularity, and time-bound quality of actual experience, when transmuted into "information" that is infinite and always and everywhere instantaneously available, must make all such narrative and qualitative distinctions

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[9] William Poteat, *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture: Essays by William H. Poteat* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 30.

[10] Albert Borgmann, "Pointless Perfection and Blessed Burdens," in *Crux* 47:4 (2011), 20-8.

meaningless. The old and humane adage "all's well that ends well" can have no meaning within a system that cannot distinguish ends from beginnings, and neither can the notion of personal identity. For just as place is necessary for the formation of personal identity, so also does personal formation require time, often long periods of it. In a world operating at speeds that approach simultaneity and in which sequential time is therefore no longer humanly recognizable, the formation of personal identity must become all but impossible.

Why have we allowed all of this to happen? Here Ellul offers a blunt theological interpretation of our predicament. While modern technology does develop out modern science's understanding of given nature, and particularly out of its understanding of natural forces, human beings deploy this knowledge and these forces in the distinctly *un*-natural directions of homogeneity and uniformity, and all for the sake of the efficient accumulation of such things as money and power. Why? Because, Ellul reminds us, we are sinners at enmity with the Divine purpose. Thus, whereas created nature is profligate, extravagant, apparently wasteful, but full of *life*, we are stingy and miserly, hemmed in by death, scarcity, necessity, greed, covetousness, and the environments we create are very often lifeless. Rather than repent of our *hubris*, we attempt instead to refashion the created order. "Technique," Ellul observes along this line, "advocates the entire remaking of life and its framework because they have been so badly made."[11]

The spiritual impulse behind modern technological development would seem, therefore, to be a distinctly modern form of ancient *Gnosticism*, that odd but persistent amalgamation of religious convictions and practices whose adherents shunned the lower realm of materiality and physicality and sought release into an upper, purely spiritual realm by means of initiation into special religious insight or knowledge ("*gnosis*"). While modern technological "Gnostics" might not go as far as to say that matter *per se* is evil, they do chafe at the traditional theological notion that created nature ought to shape and delimit human aspirations. On the contrary, "nature" – which includes the human body – is simply something to be mastered by the human *spirit* and re-

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[11] Ellul, *Technological Society*, 142-3.

mastered if necessary for the sake of purposes that human beings have *willed*. Gnostic themes have hitherto been mostly implicit within the modern technological milieu, but they have surfaced explicitly and with increasing frequency at the forefront of contemporary technological research and development. They are very much at the heart of the so-called "cybernetic revolution," that view of the world that believes that it is possible to reduce all of reality to bits of underlying information that can then be infinitely manipulated and reconfigured as desired.

Stung by accusations of pessimism, Ellul was at pains to stress that his critique of modern technology should not be taken to mean that Christians must somehow repudiate it. On the contrary, he insisted, those bearing witness to Christian hope must rather *transcend* modern technology. In this connection, Ellul believed that the Christian's vocation today must be one of discerning modern technology's peculiar logic so as to be able to detect the avenues of free and redemptive action that are still open within the technological milieu. Even when things are technologically conditioned, structured, planned, etc., there are always, what he termed, "lacunae" within which free and redemptive action remains possible.[12] The necessities of our technological culture are not (yet) such as to have eliminated the possibility of freedom. The Christian, therefore, is the one who brings as much "free play" as possible into government, into bureaucracy, into business, in short, into any social sphere that would otherwise be totally determined by the logic of technology.[13] In short, given the threat "*la Technique*" poses to the formation of personality it is incumbent upon Christians to protect the possibility of genuinely *personal* agency. The Christian's "fight of faith" is not a fight *against* other people, Ellul stressed at the conclusion of *The New Demons* (1975), rather it is to "undertake the one, finally indispensible liberation of the person of our times."[14]

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[12] Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work*, edited by William H. Vanderburg (Condord, ON: Anansi, 1997), 110.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 228.