

A Comparison of Edward Hall's *Triad* and Jacques Ellul's *Technique*

There is a certain irony in the conference topic for IJES 2020, "Ellul and Charbonneau on Ethics in an Age of Ecological and Technological Challenge" with regard to the word *ethics*. As Ellul repeatedly points out, the technological society renders ethical questions moot, so what are we talking about? Are we preaching to the choir, or are we addressing the entire world, given that technicised and non-technicised peoples do not inhabit the same ethical worldview? Both can use the same words but mean different things. For example, Ellul's well-known maxim, "Think globally, act locally," to a technicised person could mean "apply technique to a local problem," not the solution Ellul would have in mind. I propose to discuss this challenge through the cultural lens of the anthropologist Edward Hall and his seminal proposal that culture consists of three levels. Hall's work can help us to understand how technique is connected to human community and also how technique has reinterpreted ethics and not simply made it go away.

Ever since Sigmund Freud developed his idea of the unconscious, there has been a growing awareness of two levels of culture, called by different names, but in this paper (following Hall) termed formal and informal. In his book *The Silent Language* (1959, 1981), Hall adds a third level--the technical. His analysis brings a cross-cultural and anthropological perspective to Ellul's concept of *technique*. The historical record suggest that all three levels have been present in human cultures from the very beginning.

Hall and fellow anthropologist George Trager arrived at their tripartite theory by studying how Americans used and thought of time, observing that there were three kinds: formal time, which controls daily life and is taken for granted; informal time, which relates to situational time

and uses imprecise expressions such as “awhile” and “in a minute;” and technical time, which is used by scientists and technicians.

The formal level is the overt part of culture that is taught by “precept and admonition.” The informal level is tacit and learned by the imitation of examples around us. Hall’s technical level is akin to Ellul’s *technological operation*, his acknowledgement of the human use of tools and procedures, which have obtained in all times and places to varying degrees. Hall here recognizes something like technique as applied to abstractions such as culture and law as being something that has been present from of old. This has implications for considering technique in its modern setting. Though Ellul has emphasized technology, or technique as discourse, as a particularly modern phenomenon, speaking of how “techniques are becoming less and less material” (*Technological Society* 268), he also described in *The Theological Foundation of Law* how law had evolved into a highly technical framework in such ancient cultures as the Roman Empire. He argued for example,

When, for instance, law has become purely technical in several nations, the law which is technically most advanced will impose itself everywhere. This what happened with Roman law. This is also what happened with the French Civil Code which spread to countries as dissimilar as Japan and Turkey. But in this purely technical law any criterion of law or non-law may be adopted. (1969 29)

Hall also suggests that these things have been a longstanding organization of culture, and it is a component of culture that is not dependent on a society being filled with material technology. Ellul does recognize the ancient roots of technique (“Technical activity is the most primitive activity of man,” 1964:23), and his assertion “the law which is technically most advanced will impose itself everywhere” looks like an early description of technique, early both in human

history and in his own research. This ability of the technical to “impose” itself raises the question of why? What is it about human nature that makes it susceptible to domination by technology?

Ellul in *The Technological Society* begins to address this question:

And here we face a mystery. What is the origin of this activity? It [technical activity] is a phenomenon which admits of no complete explanation. By patient research, one finds areas of imitation, transitions from one technical form to another, examples of penetration. But at the core there is a closed area—the phenomenon of *invention*.

Ellul goes on to add,

It can be shown that technique is absorbed into man’s psychology and depends upon that psychology and upon what has been called technical motivation. But we have no explanation of how an activity which once did not exist came to be.

Hall’s concept of technical culture provides an answer to Ellul’s questions. Technique is not simply something that “is absorbed into man’s psychology;” rather, technical culture is an intrinsic part of human psychology.

Hall cites numerous cross-cultural examples where one or the other level predominated in some sphere of life. Technical culture is taught explicitly using logical analysis and a coherent outline. Hall named the American armed forces as a particularly fine example, where techniques have been worked out for training large masses of recruits. The success of the training depended less on the aptitude of the student and more on how the material is organized. Hall cited the need for trained technicians during World War II. It had been assumed that people with mechanical aptitude would make good airplane mechanics, but it turned out that a good shoe clerk would make a better mechanic than someone who had fixed cars all his life, because the most important

trait was not mechanical aptitude but the ability to follow instructions. The best recruit was “a mildly obsessional person who could read and follow instructions,” and not someone who had their own ideas on how to fix machines. (This example is similar to the many examples Ellul provides of technique as diminishing the need for human talent and excellence and also of technique using humans that are most adaptable to its rigors.)

Hall observed that these three states of culture were fluid and would shift into one another: “formal activity tends to become informal, informal tends toward the technical, and very often the technical will take on the trappings of a new formal system.” I believe these changes can be applied to Ellul’s understanding of technique as the technological swallowing-up of society and the substitution of a will to power and progress in place of values that promote human flourishing. The powerful success of technology has become a new formal system, and this formal system has become informal ideology. Echoing Ellul, Hall writes,

... a good deal of what goes under the heading of science would more appropriately be classed as a new formal system which is very rapidly displacing or altering our older formal systems centered in folk beliefs and religion. (66)

Hall has provided here a cultural framework for the success of technique in terms of cultural change. Human spontaneity is culturally conditioned, and technique makes spontaneity conscious and rational and therefore controlled, an example of the informal cultural becoming technical culture. The push for technical solutions for all problems is an example of technical culture becoming formal culture. And propaganda (which I will not develop in this talk) with its unconscious manipulation of the human personality is an example of formal culture becoming informal culture. Following this chain of reasoning, technique—the intensification of technology—can be viewed in cultural terms as an increase in technical culture at the expense of

much formal culture and also as a substitution of the values of technical progress in place of other values for both formal and informal culture.

One of Hall's claims is that it is extremely difficult to carry out more than one element of the formal, informal, technical triad at the same time. Though all three are present in various situations, only one will dominate at a time, another characteristic of Ellul's *technique*. Hall's framework provides us with tools both to understand how technique and technology (discourse about technique) become a part of formal and informal culture and also how to communicate to those whose ethics have been shaped by the technological society. Without ethical common ground, identical words and phrases don't communicate. Hall suggests,

If a person really wants to help introduce culture change he or she should find out what is happening on the informal level and pinpoint which informal adaptations seem to be most successful in daily operations. Bring these to the level of awareness. Even this process can only accelerate change, not actually control it in the manner desired by people of action. This is because the out-of-awareness nature of the informal is where all changes start. (93)

All this dovetails with the theme of this conference, because ethics is mediated through culture. Hence, as culture becomes fixated on technique, ethics will be mediated and shaped by technique. Ellul has stated in *The Theological Foundation of Law* that "the content of law is, in fact, fundamentally the same everywhere." While ethics is universal, ethical application is implemented via cultural understandings and expressed in ways that are acceptable to the cultural perspectives of groups, and much of that framework is unconscious to people themselves, because culture largely operates beneath the level of our consciousness. Using Hall

and Ellul together show us how the “same” ethics changes when it is expressed in technicised and non-technicised worldviews.

To give one example of the unconscious way in which culture gives form to ethics, American culture has long been on a path where it increasingly has grown uncomfortable with giving overt negative criticism in a variety of settings. One way Americans apply this is by wrapping negative assessment within compliments and positive comments. Thus, one can hear the cultural more in the United States, “Say three nice things for every one negative thing you say.” In educational settings, teachers are often admonished to praise a student and find something good in their work before they point out something to criticize.

In contrast, there are cultures that affirm the ethical value of giving negative feedback, such as French and Israeli culture. When asked their reasons, one can often hear the idea that the truth is most important, and it should not pay the price for “being nice.” In a cross-cultural setting, Americans don’t realize how their ethical perspective can be very confusing to someone from a culture that gives out complements more sparingly and prioritizes truth-telling over sparing one’s feelings.

The cultural differences here channel the ethical concerns, with American culture prioritizing being nice over saying the truth and French culture prioritizing saying the truth over being nice. In *The Culture Map*, Erin Meyer tells a humorous story of a French expatriate Sabine, “a highly energetic finance director” who moved from her native France to take a two-year assignment in Chicago that she had been seeking for a number of years. Meyer, an expert on cross-cultural business communication based in France, had prepped Sabine for her move to American culture. After four months in the U.S., Meyer called Sabine’s American boss for a pre-scheduled follow-up conversation to see how the move was going.

Jake, Sabine's boss, gave a critical evaluation. He said, ... there are several critical things that I need Sabine to change about the way she is working, and I don't see her making an effort to do so.... I have spoken to her a handful of times about these things, but she is not getting the message. She just continues with her same work patterns. I spoke to her last Thursday about this again, but there's still no visible effort on her part.... We had her performance review this morning and I detailed these issues again. We'll wait and see. But if she doesn't get in gear with these things, I don't think this job is going to work out.

Meyer, understandably concerned, later called Sabine to ask her how the job was going.

She replied,

Things are going great! My team is terrific. I've really been able to connect with them. And I have a great relationship with my boss. *Je m'epanouis!* ["I'm blossoming."] For the first time in my career, I've found a job that is just perfect for me.... Oh, and I have to tell you—I had my first performance review this morning. I'm just delighted! It was the best performance review I have had since starting with this company. I often think I will try to extend my stay beyond these two years, things are going so well.

Why was there such a misunderstanding between the American boss and the French employee?

Upon probing deeper, Meyer identified how the opposing values of American culture and French culture led to the breakdown in communication. Americans tend to give positive evaluations openly and negative evaluations are wrapped in copious positive comments. French culture tends to give negative feedback more directly and positive feedback implicitly. Thus, it was not

surprising that when Sabine received her performance review, she heard the positive comments and didn't hear the negative ones because she and her boss had different expectations for what each meant. Also important for our purposes is that Jake interpreted Sabine's ethically. Why would she not change when he had told her to? Humans are moral beings who tend to interpret others' actions ethically, not neutrally.

Hall gives another example of how culture mediates ethics which also illustrates the formal, informal and technical aspects of culture. It is an episode that comes from the depression era, but it is familiar enough to be appreciated today. He begins by discussing the generalities of Hispanic and Anglo American cultures with regard to the interaction of law, government and family. At that time, the institution of the family in Hispanic was developed to a size and influence that far outstripped its role in Anglo culture. Yet government occupied a much smaller role than it did in Anglo culture. If something needed to happen, families were better at handling the affair than the government.

These observations reflect the role of law in each culture. Law in Latin culture was enforced technically but mediated through the family (cf. Ellul's comments about the technical nature of law in the Roman Empire), whereas in Anglo culture, law was not supposed to be harshly applied and was to be guided by formal aspects of the culture. Hence, the law should not be stricter than the rest of the culture, and when it was, it must be changed. If an Anglo American comes across an unjust law, he or she is more likely to violate it.

These two different cultures came into serious conflict in a western town over the enforcement of the speed limit. The town was predominantly Spanish, and it had a motorcycle policeman named Sancho who was culturally Spanish. His duties included the responsibility of

enforcing the speed limit of 15 mph, not only in town but also on the outskirts, which included a stretch of two national highways.

Sancho would arrest people who went 16 mph, which brought a fine of \$12.75, a large sum of money during the depression. Why? Because law was enforced as a technical matter. However, the influence of family meant that when Spanish-Americans were brought before the court, they usually had a cousin or uncle on the bench and were typically acquitted.

Both cultures had the same outcome (driving 16 mph was not ultimately punished) but got there by different routes. The Anglo culture viewed speed limits informally so that there was a gray area where some small number of miles per hour above the speed limit was overlooked. The Spanish culture had no gray area but allowed family to adjudicate in minor matters. Among their own culture, no one paid a fine for going 16 miles per hour, although Anglos were bewildered and angry when they were fined in these instances. Each culture viewed the other with suspicion. Anglo culture expected law to be enforced impartially once it was set in motion, and Spanish culture expected law to be applied technically and not in such a squishy manner.

This discussion exemplifies the biblical teaching that ethics is a universal component of the human heart. Though Ellul points out that the technological society renders ethical questions moot, it doesn't mean that humans have abandoned ethics but rather have reinterpreted ethics to fit their modern worldview.

For example, let's consider a verse like James 4.17: "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." Do people believe this and live by this today? I believe this is a case of how ethics has become culturally transformed by technology becoming informal culture. The growth of technology has led to the belief that everything should be solved by technology, and technology is something achieved by society, rather than being an individual

responsibility. A long time ago, technology was a tool among many tools in the human toolbox, and technology was used to solve some problems but not every problem. Now technology is the only tool in the toolbox. If technology is the only tool in the toolbox, then the right thing to do is to provide a technical solution, and failure to do so is a corporate and government failure, not an individual failure. This leads logically to propaganda and the compulsion that social pressure must be brought to bear to force the government and other corporate bodies to do the “right” thing. James 4.17 says,

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

The “Technique Translation” of 4.17 might be this:

Society must solve every problem by technique, and it has failed if it does not do so.

The person has become society. Sin has become failure. The right thing has become technique. This perhaps is one of the most distinctive characteristics of modern society that is dominated by technology, how the locus of ethics has been (unconsciously) changed from the individual person to the entire society.

We can see this ethical understanding in the COVID-19 pandemic, which illustrates Ellul’s elucidation of technique. In the following comments, I am not taking a stand on the science of any position on the treatment or prevention of COVID-19 but simply observing it from the lens of Ellul’s technique. The pandemic begins as an example of how technology solves problems and at the same time creates new problems. The highly developed transportation sector that moves people and goods easily and quickly across the globe also lead to the rapid spreading of a virus before it was diagnosed. Even after lockdowns and restrictions on travel were enacted around the world, new variants of COVID from places like England, Brazil, South Africa, and

India still emerged in the United States and other countries, a testimony to how technology has shrunk the world for both good and bad and has turned the problems of the world into every individual's problem as well. (If it turns out that COVID-19 was engineered through human research and escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan, China, we have another example of technology creating new problems.)

The ethics of the pandemic was that people demanded technical solutions to the problem of COVID-19. The only individual responsibility was to conform to the mandates issued by governments and health authorities. The glories of technology were on full display as multiple vaccines with what appeared to be high efficacy were developed in record time, a real witness to the power of human technology. Technique constantly speeds up the pace of human life, and here is a success story of science inventing medical solutions at a record speed. The inherent goodness of technique also expressed itself as the inherent goodness of global solutions. Technique tends to the global rather than the particular; its logic is to ignore context and treat all things uniformly. Hence, the public discourse promoted by propaganda was the one "best" solution, which was vaccines, rather than treatment or amelioration of the disease. Insofar as vaccines were THE solution to the pandemic, and the solution appeared to be working, the whole scenario justified technique and reinforced the belief that it is the one Savior for the world going forward. I have been particularly fascinated by the propaganda dimension of COVID-19. Though science is inherently a messy process with competing views and theories jostling to explain the world, the major media in the U.S. had to present one explanation at a time, and dissenting views, even from reputable scientists, were not allowed to be a part of the public discourse. When changes in policy were introduced into the narrative, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently did with regard to the length of quarantine after someone was diagnosed

with COVID, there was an outcry about muddled messaging, rather than an acknowledgment that science is a progressive endeavor where understanding changes and progresses as research is conducted and refined. Ellul has described how people are so conditioned to propaganda and comforted by it that open and free discourse is threatening to them.

Once the pandemic arrived, the propaganda of the mass media shifted into high gear. There was tremendous pressure applied to promote the government's policies and an overall condemnation of expressing independent judgment on the virus and responses to it. This condemnation was ethical. Many stories were told about how a member of some family died from COVID-19 (always unvaccinated); therefore, it was unethical to think differently from the official positions voiced in the media.

COVID-19 has also been a poster child for how technology and its consequences destroy community and human wellbeing. Physical distancing and masks and social lockdowns have led to social isolation and a loss of the spiritual renewal we receive from face-to-face interaction. On the whole, the pandemic has been a fine example of the new ethics that stems from technique and from technical culture that has become informal culture.

I end with a few implications of combining Hall with Ellul. When Hall's tripartite theory is added to Ellul's developed understanding of technique, it raises at least two other issues to consider with regard to technique. First, Hall's work on technical culture emphasizes that it has been an intrinsic part of human society from of old and found in all societies. Hall gives examples of non-western societies where important technical culture plays a very large role in their daily life. Though Ellul often emphasizes the uniqueness of modern technique, it is of a piece with technical culture from previous millennia. It is intriguing to consider the Tower of

Babel story in Genesis 11; interpreters focus on its explanations for the origin of languages, but through Ellul's lens, it just as much speaks to technique. When God says,

Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them

it sounds like an early warning about technique and its vast power. While the modern era has seen this intensification, which Ellul reacted to so strenuously, perhaps there is insight to be gained by probing more its longstanding presence in human culture. These considerations might begin to help us answer why technique even exists in the first place. Ellul's and Hall's work together suggests that technique had to come into existence. The reasoning would be as follows:

Human culture contains formal, informal and technical culture.

These are all intrinsic aspects of the human heart and human community. They define what it means to be human.

All these levels contain potentials which may or may not be realized by a given society.

Ellul has taught us, if something can happen, it will happen. (*The Technological Society* 99)

Hence, the intrinsic potential of technical culture had to become technique.

It could have happened in Genesis 11, but it happened instead according to Ellul in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Second, the longstanding existence of technical culture can cause us to revisit our ethical assessment of technique. Why did ancient cultures follow technical means when they did? What were their motivations, spiritual or otherwise? Why did the Roman Empire follow a technical

application of law? Was it forced upon them by circumstances? Ellul often explains how size forces the intensification of technique. Was there some other value that they were pursuing? Hall, who trained Americans in both business and government to work overseas, advised them to be careful about introducing changes that violated formal norms, and one way to do this was to introduce technical changes, which he saw as a way of avoiding cultural conflict. (Ellul makes a similar comment in *The Technological Society* p. 123). These changes could be introduced into their technical culture (which exists in all cultures) or introduced as a new system complete in itself. For example, air travel was introduced into parts of Latin America before the automobile stage had even been reached. Implicit in this advice is the feeling that technical culture is neutral, and I believe that this is one of the real powers in technique—the sense that it is value-free, having to do with technology and obvious human needs and so also something that avoids moral debate and assessment. As institutions in the world grow and their need for more power increases, which means incorporating more people into their domain, technical culture or technique does create a kind of unity. On the basis of Hall's premise of a level of technical culture in addition to formal and informal culture, one could say that this is a unity realized through at least this idea—there is a real shared understanding of the goodness and neutrality of technology. Though Hall is observing some of the same phenomena as Ellul did, he himself did not have a negative view of technical culture as Ellul had a negative view of technique.

To take a different kind of example, one could view the evolution of how the Jews understood the Law of Moses in Jesus' day in terms of technical culture. Echoes can be seen in Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. For example, we read in vs. 16-17,

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.

In dealing with the problem of oaths, their solution was to complicate the evaluation by distinguishing between binding and nonbinding oaths on the basis of what was sworn by, an example of technique in applying the value of precision to human personality in a way that ultimately gutted the moral significance of what Moses had commanded. Jesus attributed this technical change to spiritual blindness and hypocrisy, not to any good motivation on the part of the ruling class and teachers of Jewish society.

Ellul has emphasized that technique is produced without a plan, but the question still arises, what was motivating people when they increased technique? One thing that emerges here is that it is an effective way to evade the moral component of life, especially as it is expressed in formal culture. It may be that people seek to evade it for slightly different reasons. If we accept Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees and scribes, their technicising of the law was a way to evade obedience to God, a bad motivation. But also, people seek to evade the moral component of life as it is expressed in formal culture, to avoid cultural conflict, and they use technical culture (thought to be neutral) to unite people, a move Hall even suggested to Americans who were trying to cross cultural boundaries. Seeking to avoid conflict between different peoples is a good motivation. At the same time, humans are ethical beings, and their ethics doesn't go away but is rather reinterpreted so that technique itself becomes the ethical good. I would suggest that those who like Ellul are concerned with technique need to understand the full range of reasons, both good and bad for why people esteem and justify technique.

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