

Excerpts from Ellul's "Human Techniques," *The Technological Society* (1954)

Prelude by Ted Lewis, Spring 2024

After surveying the characteristics of *technique*, the social force that drives and governs all aspects of modern society in political, economic and cultural realms, Ellul concludes his book by examining the way *technique* ultimately reconstitutes our very humanity. A key concept for Ellul is that when this process happens totalistically, there is complete *integration* of human life with the technological environment. The machine is not only adapted to man, as we'll soon read below, but man is adapted to the machine (395). The same could be said of propaganda. When mass society is well lubricated (413), producing no friction, society can achieve "total integration" where even efforts of resistance are integrated into the larger system.

But did Ellul fully anticipate the postmodern trends that mark the start of the 21st century? Peter Fallon, in his book *Propaganda 2.1: Understanding Propaganda in the Digital Age*, helpfully delineates between the standard 2.0 propaganda of the 20th century (which Ellul engaged), and a new 2.1 propaganda of the last couple decades. Whereas redundancy of information is crucial to bring about and sustain the conventional aim of integration, our current era has seen the prevalence of entropy and uncertainty as hallmarks of our information-scape. We now live in a milieu of dizzying *disintegration* where competing propagandas (yes, plural) keep the masses in a constant state of tension and confusion. Whereas *agreement* is vital to 2.0, *disagreement* is vital component to 2.1.

As we read these three following excerpts from Ellul, we can ask two questions:

1. What is Ellul's enduring wisdom from the 1950s for our current critiques of society and information management?
2. What are the new conditions of our times that Ellul did not foresee which call for a fresh critique and perhaps new expressions of responsibility?

Section 1 (of 3) Read for the April 20 zoom discussion

"Echoes" (starting on 387)

Techniques, Men, and Man. Here ends the long encirclement of men by technique. It is not the result of a plot or plan by any one man or any group of men who direct it or apply it or shunt it in new directions. The technical phenomenon is impersonal, and in following its course we have found that it is directed toward man. In investigating its preferred loci, we find man himself. This man is not the man in the mirror. Nor is he the man next door or the man in the street. Proceeding at its own tempo, technique analyzes its objects so that it can reconstitute them; in the case of man, it has analyzed him and synthesized a hitherto unknown being.

(3 paragraph jump) A single technique and its guarded application to a limited sphere is the starting point of dissociation. No technician anywhere would say that he is submitting men, collectively or individually, to technique. The bio-geneticist who experiments on the human

embryo, or the film director who tries to affect his audience to the greatest possible degree, makes no claim that he is working on man. The individual is broken into a number of independent fragments, and no two techniques have the same dimensions or depth. Nor does any combination of techniques (for example, propaganda plus vocational guidance) correspond to any part of the human being. The result is that every technique can assert its innocence. Where, then, or by whom, is the human individual being attacked? Nowhere and by no one. Such is the reply of technique and technician. They ask indignantly how it can be alleged that the human being is being attacked through the application of the new school of technique. According to them, the charge itself demonstrates an absence of comprehension and the presence of erroneous, not to say malicious, prejudices. And, in fact, every technician taken separately can affirm that he is innocent of aggressive designs against the human being. The biologist, working on a living embryo with the consent of the mother, is guilty of no assault on her life or her honor. Thus, since no technician applies his technique to the whole man, he can wash his hands of responsibility and declare that the human being remains intact.

A larger view of the technician's operations thus presents a totally reassuring and even edifying picture. Every technician working on a tiny particle (so tiny it could not be considered a man) of living flesh can claim that he is at work in the name of a higher being: Man.

(Jump to page 395) Human techniques, therefore, are obliged to become a part of the technical system; the reassuring conclusions drawn by some writers seem correspondingly less convincing. The explicit problem then seems to be: If we can perceive certain echoes of techniques in man, how do these *echoes* enable us to measure the degree of human technical encirclement?

L 'homme-machine*. A progressively more complete technical knowledge of man is being developed. Will it liberate him? Man's traditional, spontaneous activities are now subjected to analysis in all their aspects— objects, modes, durations, quantities, results. The totality of these actions and feelings is then systematized, schematized, and tabulated. A human type is created which is the only recognizable "normal" As Sargent puts it "Technique will furnish me with norms of life in whatever concerns work, food, housing, education, and so on."

It is to be understood, of course, that there is no absolute obligation for the individual to conform to the type. He can, if he will, despise it. But then he will always find himself in an inferior position, vis-a-vis the type, whenever the two come into competition. Our human techniques must therefore result in the complete conditioning of human behavior. They must assimilate man into the complex "man-machine," the formula of the future.

In the coupling of man and machine, a genuinely new entity comes into being. Most writers still insist on the modern tendency, which they profess to discern, to adapt the machine to the man. Such adaptation doubtless exists and represents a great improvement; but it entails its

* L 'homme-machine (Ellul's footnote). Literally, "Man: a machine," A famous French phrase and the title of Julien Offroy de la Mettrwfs celebrated work (1748) which argues the materialistic thesis that the soul, like the muscles, is the result of metabolism. (Trans.)

counterpart, the complete adaptation of the man to the machine. This last does not lie in a remote future. Man's nature has already been modified; and it is to an already adapted individual that technique adapts mechanical apparatus. Such adaptation is becoming progressively easier, and even takes place spontaneously when the human techniques co-operate.

A familiar case in point is the "fixation" of workers in their work. Polls reveal that when a worker begins work on an assembly line, he frequently experiences a certain malaise. He is simply not cut out for such work, and assembly-line workers are often tempted to abandon it or to request transfers. They become jittery and nervous, and evidence a profound uneasiness. But to make a living and to avoid the ever-threatening unemployment, they must hold on to their jobs. They must force themselves to adjust to working conditions as they find them. They are "fixed." When they are questioned, they claim to be satisfied and disclaim any desire for change; the very idea of change, in fact, can call forth real fear. The results of such polls are taken to indicate that the working man is happy. But a completely different interpretation is possible: that the constant exercise of impersonal labor has resulted in the total depersonalization of the laborer. He has been shaped by his work, used by it, mechanized, and assimilated. Impartial psychological investigations reveal that the workers have been deprived of initiative and responsibility; they are "adapted" to the degree that they have become inert, unable to take risks in any area. Such findings do not, perhaps, apply to all workers, but they represent the current tendency. They are, moreover, readily understandable. Why should we demand that workers be supermen? Workers, like all other men in the technical society, have acquired a fear of change, and feel the need of the work that costs them so much. Their situation is analogous to that of the man who began by reacting to propaganda, progressively abandoned himself to it, ended by being manipulated by it, and is no longer capable of dispensing with this adjuvant to personality and excitant to thought and feeling.

Until recently it was possible to show that worker adaptation to a given machine did not represent excessive specialization in the important sense that the specialized worker could be adapted to a very great number of different machines. This statement is still perhaps true for the period we are passing through today. But the more monumental and exacting the machine becomes (and by machine, I understand *organization*, too), the more indissoluble the complex man-machine becomes. The difficulty experienced by pilots of hypermodern aircraft in changing over to another type of machine, or even to another machine of the same type, is well known. This last seems a good example of the irreversible conditioning of the individual by technique. The more human factors are taken into account in the development of technique, the more man himself is a part of the development, not perhaps in a subordinate role, but irreversibly and indissolubly superordinated. But such superordination, even if we take it in its most favorable light, can scarcely represent human liberation; the human being becomes completely incapable of escaping from the technical order of things. Man and technique bear the same relation to each other as the social superstructure bears to the economic infrastructure in the Marxist scheme of things. Technicized man literally no longer exists except in relation to the technical infrastructure.

(T. Lewis consideration: re-read the last paragraph with AI computer technologies in mind.)

The theory might be advanced that in the man-machine complex man in some sense plays the role that the soul plays in relation to the body in certain philosophies. But the contrary would rather seem the case, as J. M. Lahy implied long ago when he asked: "Will not this man have less and less time to be conscious of his own living presence?" No doubt, man will continue to steer the machine, but only at the price of his individuality.

Again, the adaptability of man will be raised as an objection to my thesis. Why should not man be able to adapt to the technical context, since he has in the past adapted to so many new situations and to so many different conditions equally representative of profound change? Why should he forfeit his personal life now, after he has for so long been able to take new conditions in stride without forfeiting it? Technical adaptation will doubtless produce anew human type, but why should this be condemned? My reply to this theory (which has enjoyed great vogue in the past few years) is that man does indeed possess an extraordinary adaptive capacity, but this adaptability has produced very varied results. Some natives of Tierra del Fuego have succeeded in adapting to life on Cape Horn; but it can hardly be maintained that they represent a very desirable human type. I entertain no doubts whatsoever that a generalized human adaptability exists, but I am much less certain of the excellence of its results in what concerns men in the concrete. I must add that I am much more interested in real men who actually exist than in that ideal Man which has no existence except as an image and an abstraction.

The ideal Man is an escapism which eases every kind of enormity with tranquilizing abstractions. We should remember what the Nazis did with respect to this ideal in their extermination camps (which destroyed some millions of unimportant specimens). We ought to avoid the same mistake with respect to this all-virtuous ideal in the universal concentration camp we live in. What is important is not the adaptability of Man, but the adaptability of men. We shall find the answer, not in the immortal soul of the Species, but in the preservation of our own individual souls, which are, perhaps, not immortal.

Our personal adaptability is limited. There are circumstances in which men as we know them cannot live at all. They cannot live, for example, in concentration camps, even when these exist without supplementary tortures. There are conditions in which they can indeed continue to exist, but only with the loss of everything which makes them peculiarly human. In this connection we have only to think of certain tribes terrifyingly close to the animal level (and, in some aspects of life, even below it). We need only think of the Nazi torture apparatus, or of the degradation experienced by the ordinary man in the ranks of the army in wartime. In view of these examples, we are entitled to ask what adaptation will really be like in the man-machine complex. The psycho-technicians have recognized that adaptation is not possible for everyone. In a completely technicized world, there will be whole categories of men who will have no place at all, because universal adaptation will be required. Those who are adaptable will be so rigorously adapted that no play in the complex will be possible. The complete joining of man and machine will have the advantage, however, of making the adaptation painless. And it will assure the technical efficiency of the individuals who survive it.

Up to the present, adaptation has been the product of material interaction, with all this implies in laxness, misfitting, and excess. But future adaptation will be calculated according to a strict system, the so-called "biocracy." It will be impossible to escape this system of adaptation because it will be articulated with so much scientific understanding of the human being. The individual will have no more need of conscience and virtue; his moral and mental furnishings will be a matter of the biocrat's decisions.

At present we have little conception of what this new man will be like. The technician by his existence gives us an inkling, but an imperfect one; the technician still retains elements of spontaneity. We are, however, able to divine what the new man will gain and what he will lose in comparison with the average modern man.

What follows (398 to 410) are three sections: "The Disassociation of Man," "The Triumph of the Unconscious," and "Mass Man," where Ellul explores the psychological aspects of integration, such as the way advertising shapes collective thought and behavior.

Section 2 Read for the May 18 zoom discussion

"Total Integration" (starting on page 410)

Until recently, we were obliged to think of man as divided in his relation to the technical world. One part of him was given over completely to the monster and subjected to the interior and exterior rules; but the other part he could keep for himself: his inner life, his family life, his psychic life. He suffered from this division, but nonetheless he retained a very considerable measure of freedom. (When he insisted on retaining too much, he was said to be suffering from a proportionate lack of social adaptation.) Many more aspects of the human personality have been exposed to the technical society, and today very nearly the entire human race is experiencing this progressive cleavage of personality. The average man, with his sentimental and intellectual attachments to the past, suffers acutely. Rare are the men who have so completely renounced the inner life as to hurl themselves gladly and without regret into a completely technicized mode of being. Such persons may exist, but it is probable that the "joyous robot" has not yet been born

I have repeated time and again that this tension, this dichotomy, is harder and harder to bear and begins to appear more and more baneful in its influence even to the psychologists, sociologists, and teachers, that is, to the psycho-technicians in general. They want to restore man's lost unity, and patch together that which technical advances have separated. But only one way to accomplish this ever occurs to them, and that is to use technical means. Since the human sciences are applications of technical means, this entails rounding up those elements of the human personality that are still free and forcing ("reintegrating") them into the expanding technical order of things. What yet remains of private life must be forced into line by invisible techniques, which are also implacable because they are derived from personal conviction. Reintegration involves man's covert spiritual activities as well as his overt actions. Amusements,

friendship, art— all must be compelled toward the new integration, thanks to which there is to be no more social maladjustment or neurosis. Man is to be smoothed out, like a pair of pants under a steam iron.

There is no other way to regroup the elements of the human personality: the human being must be completely subjected to an omnipotent technique, and all his acts and thoughts must be the object of the human techniques. Those men, undoubtedly "men of good will," who are so preoccupied with the technical restoration of man's lost unity certainly have not willed things as they have turned out. Their error lies much more in not having clearly seen genuine alternatives. The conscientious psychologist, sympathetic though he may be to human suffering, does not even consider alternative solutions to the problem. For him, technique imposes a technical solution. And this solution indeed restores unity to the human being, but only by virtue of the total integration of man into the process which originally produced his dismemberment. The psychologist sees this dismemberment (and civilization's neuroses, too) as symptomatic of the incompleteness of the absorptive process. To achieve unity, then, means to complete the process.

Technical Anesthesia. It seems odd that the application of a technique designed to liberate men from the machine should end in subjecting them the more harshly to it. But given the technological state of mind, the paradox is easily explained. Consider a worker who is subject to a machine and its caprices. He must follow the machine's tempo and breathe its waste products. At the same time, he must fight off fatigue and boredom. In short, he must perform the work of two men. The efficiency expert comes and institutes procedures to automate actions and save energy by transforming everything into mechanical reflexes. But the psychologist is dead set against this; he finds insupportable the total subjection of the worker to the machine which the efficiency expert has elaborated, and he proposes to liberate him. To accomplish this laudable end, the psychologist in turn elaborates a science of human behavior with its own laws of human psychology; for example, laws concerning worker fatigue, and so on. He draws up a program not merely of the worker's actions in the factory, but of his whole life. The human being ends by being encased in an even broader technical framework. It will doubtless make life easier and enable him to work with a minimum of effort, but only on condition that he follow its rules to the letter. The example is a simple one, but it can be found in every sphere of human activity, wherever the psycho-technician has felt himself called upon to "liberate" mankind. Progress must obviously be paid for by even harsher subjection to the instrument of salvation. The worker is in the same situation as the invalid racked by pain who receives an anodyne narcotic which makes him an addict— the addiction persists even after he has been "cured." In much the same way, a nation that has been subjected to a totalitarian propaganda barrage is unable to get its bearings in a direct and natural way after the barrage has ceased; the psychic trauma was too profound. The sole means of liberating people from "ideas" so inculcated is through another propaganda campaign at least as intense as the first. But the new propaganda only subjects them to a psychic pressure that kills a little more of their freedom.

Consider an inquisitorial and brutal police force that operates as it pleases and carries out arrests arbitrarily. No citizen has any peace of mind. Yet the only remedy so far devised for the disease is

the establishment of the hypermodern system of dossiers. Every citizen is kept track of throughout his life, geographically, biologically, and economically; the police know precisely what he is up to at every moment. This police system no longer needs to be brutal, openly inquisitorial, or omnipresent to the public consciousness. But it permeates all of life, in a way the average citizen finds it impossible to understand. Just what has been gained? Admittedly, man need no longer be apprehensive at work, or live perpetually under suspicion, or be afraid of being subjected to the "third degree." The terror which until now has been an integral part of the police methods of totalitarian states is, or soon will be, a thing of the past. The "terror over the city," perfectly described by Cerrado Alvaro, is only a transitory stage. A diffuse terror usually follows open police raids and public executions. At this stage the police may be invisible, but they lurk in the shadows. One hears tales of secret executions in the soundproof cellars of vast, mysterious buildings. At a still more advanced stage of police technique, even this diffuse terror gradually dissipates. The police exist only to protect "good citizens." They no longer carry out raids and there is nothing mysterious about them; therefore they are not felt to be oppressive. Police work has become "scientific." Their files contain dossiers of every citizen. The police are in a position to lay hands on anyone "wanted" at any moment, and this obviates to a great degree the necessity of doing so. No one can evade the police or disappear. But, then, no one wants to. An electronic dossier is not particularly fearsome.

Here we have the essence of the techniques of "humanization": to render unnoticeable the disadvantages that other techniques have created. The task of the technician is to develop machine techniques and human techniques to such a pitch of perfection that even the man face to face with the perfectly functioning machine no longer has human initiative or the desire to escape. In a simple machine, a sticking gear or an overheated rod calls the existence of the machine to the notice of its vexed user. A lubricating technique is needed which will make the machine function so smoothly that its presence is not felt. The ability to forget the machine is the ideal of technical perfection. In the "man-machine" complex, friction results from the collision between the human being and the organization. This friction can take a number of forms. Individual initiative may become irritated by some obvious mechanical failure; the individual may insist on operating the machine in a manner not provided for in the rules of automatism. The problem then is twofold: to perfect mechanical techniques, on the one hand, and to invent and impose certain human techniques, on the other, so as to obviate the human sources of friction. As Latil has pointed out, self-guiding techniques that operate without any external interference are possible. This has been demonstrated by machines that are autonomous, have a memory, and anticipate future events. Skeptics of the kind who denied a priori the possibility of heavier-than-air machines will deride this as mere imagination. It is true that such machines have not yet been perfected, but even an approximation in this direction would suffice for our argument.

The technical society must perfect the "man-machine" complex or risk total collapse. Is there any other way out? I am convinced that there is. Unfortunately, I am also compelled to note that neither the scientists nor the technicians want any part of any other solution. And since I work with realities and not with abstractions, I recognize the inevitability of the fact that technical difficulties demand technical solutions. All the troubles provoked by the encounter between man

and technique are of a technical order, and therefore no one dreams of applying nontechnical remedies. Men distrust them. A. Sargent well expresses the common opinion:

Humanity is still captive of a metaphysical and dogmatic mentality at a time when experimental science (technique) could beyond any doubt allow them to solve their principal difficulties. We are still half buried in scholasticism at a time when biology is in a position to be our salvation. . . Our dogmatisms have well shown their mischievousness . . . It is therefore indispensable henceforth to resist the seductions of systems based on metaphysics and to face up to the one reality which we can understand and which concerns us . . . The life-sciences bring together certain means of knowledge and action. All doctrines which draw their inspiration from abstract conceptions have already betrayed their fundamental incapacity to organize the human world. Biocracy, that is, organization in accordance with the basic laws of life, represents our only chance of salvation at a moment of our development in which the various metaphysics and systems left over from archaic cultures still corrupt human life.

Sargent's position is clear. What is catastrophic in our situation is the survival of philosophies, political doctrines, and religion. (I am unable, incidentally, to believe them so powerful!) As to technique, it is completely innocent of the imminent catastrophes. Despite exaggerations, the text is clear: no other solution is possible, no other hope, than that represented by the improvement of human techniques. Every other solution is either inefficient or mischievous.

Sargent's attitude is representative of that of the majority of technicians. We have already examined the kind of future it holds in store for us.

Section 3 Read for the June 15 zoom discussion

“Integration of the Instincts and of the Spiritual” (starts on page 415)

We shall now take up perhaps the most difficult technical phenomena to grasp, inasmuch as they do not concern human techniques directly, but rather certain of their results.

It is often objected that skeptics fail to understand the nature of technical society because they are unwilling or unable to accept the extraordinary power of spiritual resistance to technical invasion of which human beings are capable. Everywhere, it is said, human liberty affirms itself in a world that the skeptics have declared closed to it. In proof of this, literary and musical forms are invoked like magical incantations. Abstract painting, surrealism, jazz; ethical forms such as “eroticism” and the “politics of engagement” are said to be manifestations of the supremacy of human freedom and will in the technical society. No one, of course, seeks to deny that these phenomena are immediately related to the technicity of the present; the question is how they are to be interpreted. It is true that man has psychic power, the strength of which is not yet known. Man is capable of outbursts of passion and violence. It does not seem that those sources of vital

energy which might be summarized as sexuality, spirituality, and capacity for feeling have been impaired.

But every time these forces attempt to assert themselves, they are flung against a ring of iron with which technique surrounds and localizes them. Moreover, technique attacks man, impairs the sources of his vitality, and takes away his mystery. We have seen that one of the objectives of certain human techniques is to rob him of this mystery. And men must and do react instinctively and spiritually to the aggression of technique. When Henry Miller utters his anguished wail against the modern world, he is appealing through his fundamental eroticism to man's most primitive instincts. When the American Negro was still a slave, jazz meant release from despair and chains. But it is questionable that eroticism and jazz really represent a purposive reaction to technical aggression. We cannot settle these problems by appealing to a purely verbal idealism.

Jazz is one of today's most authentically human protests. Let us trace it back to its origin. The Negroes were hopelessly enslaved. The story of their toil, punishments, hate, and crushed rebellions has been often told. The terrible black emperor of Santo Domingo was now no more than a dream. In their extremity the Negroes discovered song, which likewise answered the needs of faith. Music expressed for them at once the despair of the present and the hope for salvation in Christ. Its culmination in delirium brought deliverance, but only as opium and alcohol did for others. Marx's celebrated remark that nineteenth-century religion was the opiate of the European masses is equally applicable to the jazz of the Negro slaves. In jazz they created a true art form. But with it they also shut every door to freedom. Jazz imprisoned the Negroes more and more in their slavery; from then on, they drew a morose relish from it. It is highly significant that this slave music has become the music of the modern world.

All instincts seem more unbridled today than ever before— sex; passion for nature, the mountains, and the sea; passion for social and political action. There cannot have been many historical periods in which these forces were so evident or so authoritative. Again, I have no wish to deny whatever validity they possess. It is good for city dwellers to go to the country. It is good that a marked eroticism is wrecking the sclerotic traditional morality. It is well that poetry, thanks to such movements as surrealism, has become really expressive once more. But these phenomena, which express the deepest instinctive human passions, have also become totally innocuous. They question nothing, menace nobody. Behemoth (Ellul's footnote: Behemoth -- Hebrew; plural of majesty -- designates matter organized, glorified, and set in motion), can rest easy; neither Henry Miller's eroticism nor Andre Breton's surrealism will prevent him from consuming mankind. Such movements are pure formalisms, pure verbalisms. . . .

For a like reason, the "politics of engagement" are vitiated. The monolithic political parties consist of the fossilized rank and file (who can scarcely be thought to be manifesting any particular activity or to be striking a blow for freedom merely because the hearse which is transporting them is rolling along at a clip) and of party intellectuals and directors who are out after votes and money. It is as though a winner of the National Lottery could pass for a martyr.

Then there is the modern passion for nature. When it is not stockbrokers out after moose, it is a crowd of brainless conformists camping out on order and as they are told. Nowhere is there any initiative or eccentricity.

In sum, the supreme forces of human nature are set into motion for the sake of amusement. The great bell in the cathedral tower, formerly rung to call the city's warriors to arms, is sounded to amuse foreign tourists. At this point I shall not make a lengthy analysis of the social forces we have been speaking of (Ellul's footnote: I have studied these central problems in a series of articles entitled "Conformism de notre temps," *Reforme*, 1949.) It is enough to indicate the contrast between the powers aroused and the ghastly mediocrity of the end products; between the pretensions of Andre Breton, for example, and the results. What has happened to the deepest human passions stems from many different causes. The only one of concern to us here is the fact that these spiritual movements are totally confined within a technical world. Here is yet another example of the phenomenon described at length in the second chapter, that technique encompasses the totality of present-day society. Man is caught like a fly in a bottle. His attempts at culture, freedom, and creative endeavor have become mere entries in technique's filing cabinet.

The Final Resolution. A precise question is posed: Into what has technique transformed man's efforts toward the spiritual? One answer to this question is that technique possesses monopoly of action. No human activity is possible except as it is mediated and censored by the technical medium. This is the great law of the technical society. Thought or will can only be realized by borrowing from technique its modes of expression. Not even the simplest initiative can have an original, independent existence.

(Next 2 paragraphs... Ellul gives the example of someone writing a book on revolution, and how the publishing world maintains control.)

Of course, we can write or teach anything, including pornography, inflammatory revolutionary manifestoes, and new economic and political doctrines. But as soon as any of these appear to have any real effect in subverting the universal social order (which is establishing itself in every country of the world with the support of the overwhelming majority of the respective populations), they are forthwith excluded from the technical channels of communication. As Crozier justly remarks: "The intellectual has a difficult life. He can only live by communicating, but he has been deprived of the means without which he cannot communicate." The intellectual has become a mere mouthpiece subject to the demands of the various techniques. According to Wiener, this is the cause of the progressive sterilization of intellectual life in the modern world. As Wiener puts it, present-day methods of communication exclude all intellectual activity except what is so conventional that it has no decisive value.

In the same way technique controls the nascent love of nature. . . . (Here Ellul discusses camping, licenses, restrictions, etc.)

When an individual engages in political action a corresponding technical mechanism is set in motion. Political action is no longer possible except as a mass phenomenon, and "engagement"

presupposes participation in a collectivity. Only a collectivity is wealthy enough to have at its disposal the means to “play politics.” Only a collectivity can make itself felt in a world in which technique has given primacy to the quantitative rather than the qualitative. Since an inorganic mass would be inefficient, the collectivity must be optimally organized, with all that this implies in the way of unity, discipline, and tactical flexibility. These are the exclusive province of technical organization, a fact which straightway leads to the formation of monolithic political parties, which alone can hope for success. Once again technique imposes its iron law on the generous strivings of the individual heart.

These brief examples, taken from as diverse spheres as possible, make it evident that today every human initiative must use technical means to express itself. These technical means ipso facto “censor” initiative. First, they screen out whatever does not lend itself to technical expression; initiative remains a purely private matter, with no importance to the technical society. Second, they compel a rigid conformism; initiative is reduced to the lowest common denominator and is, in effect, emasculated. The interplay of the technical censorship with the pretended “anarchic” spiritual initiatives of the individual automatically produces the situation desired by Dr. Goebbels in his formulation of the great law of the technical society: “You are at liberty to seek your salvation as you understand it, provided you do nothing to change the social order.” All technicians without exception are agreed on this dictum. It is understood, of course, that the social order is everywhere essentially identical: the variation from democracy to Communism to Fascism represents a merely superficial phenomenon.

A second answer to our question of how technique has transformed man’s quest for the spiritual involves an examination of the fate of the ecstatic (see Ellul’s lengthy footnote) impulses and phenomena of the human spirit.

It is not difficult to observe that ecstatic phenomena proliferate in proportion to the technicization of society. They play an important role in modern society, but not the role usually assigned them. They function not as causes but as effects. It is childish to believe that Communism and Fascism, for example, created a mystique out of whole cloth, which they then imposed on their peoples; that they have blown up a vast bag of wind with which they “seduce” or “delude” the world. On the other hand, it is too easy to say that the Russian soul and the German soul were naturally “predisposed” to these systems. We would then have to hold that the Italian now the Yugoslav and Chinese) souls, are similarly predisposed. The myth presupposes a psychological basis—that people adhere to systems because these systems respond to something “true” in them. But this truth is certainly not very specific since very different sorts of people adhere to it. Further, mystic systems are not arbitrary creations of dictatorial regimes. No more are they the result of the demented will to power of the mighty. No “popular movement” can produce them; the requirements far exceed the spontaneous mystic capabilities of man. The real reason for the emergence of society as we know it is not mystic or psychic but technical.

It is nevertheless true that ecstatic phenomena are found today in the societies that have as their avowed aim the maximal exploitation of technique. Ecstasy occurs here, however, not as a cause

but as a result of the technical society. More specifically, it is a function of the acceleration of the tempo of the technical society, rather than of the technical level of the society.

(Jump 422) The American myth was born, presenting exactly the same religious traits as the Nazi or Communist myth. But it is different, as we have often noted, in that it still is in a spontaneous phase; it is not yet organized, utilized, and developed technically. Whatever the actual technical level of the country, as soon as technical acceleration appears, the mystique appears too.

(top of 423) Technique fully satisfies the mystic will to possess and dominate. It is unnecessary to evoke spiritual powers when machines give much better results. But technique also encourages and develops mystical phenomena. It promotes the indispensable alienation from the self necessary, for example, for the identification of the individual with an ideology.

We must conclude that it is far from accidental that ecstatic phenomena have developed to the greatest degree in the most technicized societies. And it is to be expected that these phenomena will continue to increase. This indicates nothing less than the subjection of mankind's new religious life to technique. It was formerly believed that technique and religion were in opposition and represented two totally different dispensations. It was held that, with the development of a purely materialistic society, a struggle was inevitable between the machine and the economy, on the one side, and the ideal realm of religion, art, and culture, on the other. But we can no longer hold such a boundlessly simplistic view. Ecstasy is subject to the world of technique and is its servant. Technique, on the most significant level, integrates the anarchic and antisocial impulses of the human being into society. These impulses take their influence and receive their diffusion strictly by virtue of the technical means brought into play. The ecstatic phenomena of the human psyche, which without technical means would have remained completely without effect, are deployed throughout the world.

Technical means, acting on the ecstatic phenomena, encourage certain daring innovations of expression. Consider, for example, the extraordinary artistic novelty of the cinema. But it must be remembered that the technical fact ipso facto entails the total inclusion of art and thought (however revolutionary they seem) within the social framework.

(Next couple of pages... Ellul offers examples where artistic expressions and social movements on the edge are integrated into the larger aims of a technicized society, including new sexualities, left-leaning revolts, and "all the multifarious movements designed to secure peace or social justice.")

(Final paragraph, 427) With the final integration of the instinctive and the spiritual by means of these human techniques, the edifice of the technical society will be completed. It will not be a universal concentration camp, for it will be guilty of no atrocity. It will not seem insane, for everything will be ordered, and the stains of human passion will be lost amid the chromium gleam. We shall have nothing more to lose, and nothing to win. Our deepest instincts and our most secret passions will be analyzed, published, and exploited. We shall be rewarded with everything our hearts ever desired. And the supreme luxury of the society of technical necessity will be to grant the bonus of useless revolt and of an acquiescent smile.