Organization as Technique

Daniel Cérézuelle

That modern technique is a growing depersonalizing power can be better understood when we consider what Ellul calls "organizational techniques".

The thing turn in contemporary philosophy of technology.

That "*organization is Technique*" (Ellul 1954, 19) Is an essential tenet of Ellul's sociology of technology and it is neglected by the contemporary understanding. Especially since the 1990s, philosophy of technology has taken an "empirical turn," refocusing on the study of technical objects and social practices organized around their origins or use.

For example, according to Bruno Latour (Latour 1994, 176). Technique, considered as a global phenomenon does not exist, and Latour is of the opinion that, to carefully consider the role of technology, we must now focus on technical *objects* when they are being created, and on the *agents* involved in their creation either directly or indirectly. (*ob-ject* : what stands in front of me and is experienced by my senses.)

This approach reduces the risk of straying into metaphysical generalities. And yet, this purported realism leaves aside a whole array of contemporary technological realities—that of practices and processes which are at once technical and intangible and contribute to the depersonalization of contemporary life.

The invisible continent.

These practices and processes are, in a sense, the invisible continent, ignored by many. But Strategy, management, logistics, administration, planning, and propaganda are among the many intangible techniques of organization that increasingly narrowly frame the spatial, temporal, and relational dimensions of our daily lives.

This field of intangible technologies should not be neglected on the pretext that they are a special area, separate from physical techniques. Not only is its development a result of the former's progress, but, in addition, it has in turn become one of the conditions for the

development of techniques producing material effects. We should not forget that techno-scientific innovation has now become dependent on Research and Development (R&D) management techniques.

One is condemned to a merely limited understanding of the unfolding of material techniques if one does not also take into consideration the unfolding of intangible techniques, along with the interactions between the two.

Personalist criticism of organization techniques.
Technological functionalization of personal and collective life has been perceived as a problem since the onset of industrial civilization.
In 1829, in *Signs of times*, Carlyle warned us that since "our true deity is mechanism", many non-material areas of human activities are being submitted to a technological framing, especially education and pedagogy. (In this domain his antennas were more sensitive than those of Karl Marx !).
After First World War some thinkers such as Ernst Junger Romano Guardini or Heidegger understood the possibility of a technicization of human existence, but none of them undertook a serious analysis of the problem.
One striking exception is found in the work of a group of personalist philosophers. The Bordeaux School—especially Bernard Charbonneau(1910–1996) and Jacques Ellul (1912–1994) assigned great importance to the development of intangible techniques of organization and attempted to characterize their role in establishing a technological society, especially as they affect freedom and depersonalization.

Let me start, though, with Nikolai Berdyaev, another personalist philosopher, who also focused on freedom and stressed the organizational more than the mechanical dimension of modern technique. Berdyaev's texts influenced Charbonneau and Ellul.

Berdyaev and the Concept of Technical Organization
In 1933, in *Man and Machine,* Berdyaev, advocating for an existential, socialist, and spiritualist personalism, explained that humankind has entered the "technical era" ([1933] 2019, 40). The advent of mechanization and the sudden increase in material and economic power are only the most visible aspect of a deeper phenomenon—the installation of a new anthropological system

which is that of *organization* and which affects every dimension of life. The technical world thus extends much further than material machines.

According to Berdyaev, technique brings about an anthropological transformation that goes undetected. It is no longer about having at our disposal the most efficient tools to act upon things: we are entering a different world. Technique, he writes, "makes man a cosmiurge" (43). For to a given world endowed with symbolic organic unity, both social and natural, man strives to substitute a world constructed in the mode of "organization."

Man thus organizes a new world, a "second nature" (28), on the sole basis of what his rational mind knows. What results is a de-symbolized world, stripped of any organic inner cohesiveness. The transformation by technology of culture is so profound that the task of organization no longer knows any limit. "The old organic order collapses and a new form of organization, created by technology, inevitably prevails" (38).

In the process, what began as a liberating exercise of transitive action on things ends up becoming a reflexive action of man on himself and makes organization necessary: "the organization linked to technology assumes an organizing subject who cannot be transformed into a machine; however, such organization precisely tends to turn him into a mechanism" (28), This is why Berdyaev, wanting to break the vicious circle, writes: "It is impossible to tolerate the machine's autonomy, to leave it a full freedom of action" (46).

Concerned with freedom, two young Gascons, Bernard Charbonneau and Jacques Ellul, had read Berdyaev in 1933 and they systematically developed these ideas, beginning in 1935, with their *Guidelines for a personalist manifesto*[1].

Extending Berdyaev's analyses, the two Gascons put forward a startling approach of technique, very different in being non-mechanicist ("not an industrial procedure but a general procedure" (56)), and the examples they give are mostly characterized by the intangibility of the processes involved: intellectual Technique, economic Technique, political Technique ("one of the first areas affected by technique"), juridical Technique, mechanical Technique. It is significant that mechanical technique is mentioned last, and intellectual technique first.

Besides, the technical phenomenon is interpreted first as inseparable from a state of mind that can apply the same rules and principles in all areas of human action, not just action upon matter.

---

[1] Charbonneau, Bernard et Ellul, Jacques : « Directives pour un manifeste personnaliste ». In *Nous sommes des révolutionnaires malgré nous*. Op. Cit. p. 47 à 80.

Charbonneau and Organization

Charbonneau is highly sensitive to the experience of the powerlessness of individuals before the impersonal and depersonalizing logic of modern social organization.

While the concept of *organization* does not appear in Charbonneau's first writings, the germ of this idea already exists in the *Directives pour un manifeste personnaliste*, written in 1935 with Ellul, to explain the powerlessness and loss of responsibility of individuals as a result of concentration, anonymousness and massification:

It is in 1937, in "Le sentiment de la nature, force révolutionnaire," that the term *organization* appears to refer to the forces that subjugate social life under an impersonal and abstract order that leaves nothing untouched. The word *organization* seems here synonymous with "the social armature"—that is the framework and control—that must accompany material "progress" (178).

In 1949, Charbonneau self-publishes *L'état*. As for describing the advances of the State, the term *organization* now recurs: "to turn society into an efficient *organization*, the State conquers it, . . . replacing the diversity of the natural [i.e., spontaneous] order with the unity of an *organization* in which everything starts from a center, where an apparatus of outer determinations replaces inner bonds" (52); "to a world of conflicts and powerlessness, it imposes the peace of an *organization* befitting the reasons of his will to power" (53)—

In 1973, in *Le système et le chaos*, Charbonneau puts the issue of organization at the heart of his reflection on the costs of progress and on its freedom-destroying consequences. "People have long wrongly reduced industrial civilization to the machine; it is its most visible aspect, but also its most superficial one." Our true machines are factories and offices. It is *organization* and not the machine that characterizes our time." ([1973] 2012, 49, italics added)

Techniques of Organization According to Jacques Ellul

Charbonneau's association of the concepts of technique and organization is systematized by Jacques Ellul.

As he writes in *L'illusion politique*, echoing Charbonneau's theses, "If government multiplies techniques of organization, psychological action techniques, public relations techniques,

mobilizes all forces for productivity, planifies the economy and social life, bureaucratizes all activities, reduces law to a technique for social control, socializes daily life . . . it is a totalitarian government" (Ellul [1965] 2004, 318–19).

Ellul devotes the first twenty pages of *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (1954) to explaining how the role of modern technique cannot be understood without factoring in organization as it represents a higher stage of technical progress: "It is technique applied to social, economic and administrative life." It makes it possible to integrate collectives or masses in the world created by the progress of material techniques.

Ellul puts forward a classification:

Organizational technique has to do with great masses, and the action collectives take to make their action more efficient by building an impersonal action framework. Technique of organization applies just as much to business and industrial affairs (and therefore belongs to the area of economics) as to States, to administrative or police life and to war. At this point in time, it also covers all things juridical. Economic technique and techniques of organization correspond to what today is called management technique.

Technique of man, which, contrary to the previous ones, applies to individuals: "here man himself is the object of technique" (20). "techniques of man" are the necessary complements of techniques of organization. schooling technique, work technique, professional counselling, propaganda, entertainment, sport, medicine. "Without them, man will no longer be at the same level as organizations and machines; without them, technique cannot be absolutely safe."

A little further he shows how these techniques of organization generate each other in various areas: urban planning, economics, work, public administration, and so on (103). Besides, technique tends to become interiorized, to dematerialize: "The more precise material techniques become, the more they make intellectual and psychic technique necessary" (106). "organization is precisely technique itself." (83)

In *Le système technicien,* Ellul ([1977] 2004) Ellul notes that the development of material techniques calls forth that of organization and that we have come to a stage where "productive forces are no longer the infrastructure; they have become a superstructure—that is, they cannot

develop, make new progress without a social organization infrastructure that may at once perform indispensable research for such progress, and host this progress within the social body" (76).

A decisive turn is provided by the development of the computer : "With it, knowledge becomes an organizational force" (85). Let's remember Norbert Wiene's famous essay, *Cybernetics, communication and control in the animal and the machine*. Control cannot be separated from communication.

Taken together, each of the pragmatic and limited techniques of organization contribute to a totalizing movement: "We are dealing with total technicization when every aspect of human life is subject to control and manipulation, experimentation and observation so that demonstrable efficiency is obtained everywhere" (94). And this process does not seem to know any limit.

Thus, on the social and political plane, the progress of material power is everywhere accompanied by a technocratization of political life and a growing bureaucratization of our lives that are ever more subjected to centralized, hierarchical, and opaque management and technical patterns over which we have little control.

Towards the functionalisation of existence

Two centuries after Saint-Simon's *L'organisateur*,(1819) it is clear that the worries of Charbonneau and Ellul were not paranoia! Since they published their prophetic books, the field of immaterial techniques of organization and control has never stopped developing and extending to new areas of social life.

The advances of information technology that allow the collection, storage, and treatment of data in real time made it possible to perfect business management techniques which, as Rappin has shown, foster the depersonalization of work and the emergence of servitudes of a new type, thus confirming the diagnosis of technical depersonalization put forward by Ellul and Charbonneau in the 1930s.

But things did not stay at this stage. After the enterprise, it was administration and then, among others, the whole universe of medical and social institutions which, after having been

technicized, and as a result of having been technicized, were later easily taken over by management techniques and had to submit to a process of organizational rationalization and generalized computerized protocolization, resulting in new forms of alienated work and individual and collective malaise.

Although it was not the result of a clearly conceived project, a "complete functionalization of whole swathes of our life" thus takes place (Rappin 2014, 36). Moreover, it is likely that the worsening environmental crises and their social and political consequences are going to call for a reinforcement and an extension of these techniques of organization and control, even as they remain largely overlooked by philosophers and sociologists of technique, who remain focused on "technical objects."

NOTES

1. Two examples are "An advanced state of technology is accompanied by mechanical theories of the nature of man" and by "efforts to subject man to technical rationality, to a purposeful, all-embracing functionalism" (Jünger [1949] 1956, 155), and "*Ainsi se développe une technique de la sujétion de l'être vivant*" (Guardini 2021).

2. "It was clearly evident to me that the 'organization' is part of an invisible center, not, to be sure, technology, but part of what exists in the history of the being." (Letter from Martin Heidegger to Hannah Arendt, February 15, 1950. In Arendt and Heidegger 2001, 83.

3. This observation anticipates Edmund Husserl's idea that "the earth does not move itself," in manuscript D17 (1934, in Farber 1940, 310).

4. This is an idea that is developed in Charbonneau's *L'état* (1987) and also in *Le système et le chaos* ([1973] 2012).

5. Charbonneau read *L'avenir de la science*, where Ernest Renan maintains that science must be and must only be a "patient study of things," a "pragmatic study of what is." "By all these paths, we thus come to proclaim the right that reason has to reform society through rational science and theoretical knowledge of what is. . . . *Organizing mankind scientifically*, this then is the last word of modern science, this is his bold but legitimate claim" (Renan [1890] 1995, 151).

6. See also Musso's other works on Saint-Simon (esp. 2004) and the philosophy of networks.

7. Reminder: "In an age of advanced technology, inefficiency is the sin against the Holy Ghost" (Huxley [1932] 1946, xvi).

8. Atul Gawande, "Why Doctors Hate Their Computer," *The New Yorker*, November 5, 2018. Furthermore, a note from the Vantage Technology Consulting Group of December 4, 2018, adds that, even though information systems should make health care "greener, faster, and more productive," the promises have not been realized: "A 2016 study found that physicians spend 2 hours of computer work for every hour spent with a patient. The University of Wisconsin found that the average workday for family physicians has grown to 11½ hours. The article posits that one unplanned result of going digital is that there is a growing epidemic of burnout among doctors, with 40% of them screening positive for depression and 7% reporting suicidal thoughts; this is double the rate of the general working population." (https: // www
.newyorker .com /magazine /2018 /11 /12 /why -doctors -hate -their -computers).

9. It should be noted that Gilbert Hottois has pointed out before I did the surprising failure to consider techniques of the human in the philosophy of Gilbert Simondon who, being "hypersensitive to conflict, to separation, dreams of pacification and universal conciliation," so that it labors under "a questionable philosophical irenicism" (1993, 123).