

Doug Hill

From the Iron Cage to the Technological Society

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Thirty years or so ago I fell in love with Jacques Ellul, a passion that launched me on twenty-five years of study of the history and philosophy of technology and that produced my book *Not So Fast: Thinking Twice About Technology*. Five years or so ago I fell in love with Max Weber (1864-1920), for roughly the same reason I fell in love with Ellul: Like him, Weber saw with incredible clarity the forces that were driving Western culture, along with the rest of the world, toward disaster.

Given that shared vision, I haven't been surprised to find, as I've immersed myself in Weber's work, that there are many parallels between his ideas and Ellul's. Nor was I surprised to find that Ellul deeply respected Weber and was inspired by him. In this paper I will outline some of the insights and conclusions they shared, focusing on Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (forthwith referred to as the PESC) and Ellul's *The Technological Society* (which doesn't mention Weber). I'll begin with a quick summary of Weber's basic arguments in the PESC.

The Puritan movement that grew out of the Protestant Reformation, especially the branch led by John Calvin, believed in the utter transcendence of God. A central theological conviction of that movement was the doctrine of predestination, which held that before the beginning of time God had decided the eternal fate of every human being: You were going to either heaven or hell and there was nothing you could do about it. The duty of God's chosen few – the elect – was to spend their lives building God's kingdom on Earth.

To fulfill that duty faithfully required steady, disciplined, orderly work, resting only on Sunday. All temptations of the flesh were products of the inherent sinfulness of human

nature and must be avoided. Those who were successful in following that regimen – of following the Lord’s “calling” – gained assurance that they were among the elect. This way of life placed far more demands on the Protestant laity than had been the case in Catholic religiosity, which only expected the monks in monasteries and cloistered nuns to submit themselves to such rigorous self-denial. Calvinism also introduced a radically different attitude toward making money, which had long been viewed in Catholic circles as a practice of questionable morality. Protestant asceticism, as Weber described it, “strode into the marketplace of life [and] slammed the door of the monastery behind it.”¹

These were practices that opened a door to the spirit of capitalism. The driven, disciplined productivity of the Puritan lifestyle led naturally to the accumulation of wealth. For the faithful, that wealth was to be used only to further God’s work, not to pay for a life of leisurely indulgence. But, as has been widely demonstrated, the temptations of wealth have a way of overcoming restraint, and over time, Puritans’ commitment to asceticism more frequently and more decisively wavered.²

This was especially true because the Reformation had inadvertently opened the door to religious doubt. Once the credibility of the Catholic priesthood had been undermined it became easier to question the authority of other religious leaders, especially because Luther taught that God spoke directly to believers through the Bible, no preacher required. Religion didn’t disappear, by any means, but what Weber called “disenchantment” spread, leaving hearts and minds increasingly open to the pursuit of profit for secular rather than religious ends. Before long “victorious capitalism” could rest on “mechanical foundations,” Weber wrote. It had been “emancipated from its old supports.”³

¹ PESC, p. 101. Note that all PESC quotations are from the Talcott Parsons translation, pdf version.

² For a brilliant study of how the erosion of Protestant asceticism progressed, see Richard L. Bushman’s *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765*.

³ PESC, p. 34, 124. For “disenchantment,” see Weber’s lecture “Science as Vocation.”

Other ways that capitalism and technique inherited aspects of Protestant asceticism will become apparent as I list some of more important parallels between the theories of Weber and Ellul.

1. The characteristics of capitalism and technology. Ellul wrote that technology was one element in a collection of practices and attitudes that made up the general condition he called technique. Weber described the spirit of capitalism in much the same way: It represented a collection of attitudes and practices that constituted a state of mind as well as a manner of living.

This was one of the points Ellul made about Weber's thought in a 1964 article he wrote on the PESC. "Weber in no way isolates a character or a factor," he wrote. "From the outset we find ourselves in the presence of a rapid analysis of the multiplicity of factors."⁴

2. Something new. At the outset of the Author's Forward to the revised American edition of *The Technological Society*, Ellul wrote, "I am myself involved in technological civilization...its history is also my own." The same was true of Weber in his own time. The difference was that Weber wrote while the shape of technique was in a more formative stage than it would be by the time Ellul wrote *The Technological Society*.⁵

They both agreed, however, that they were witnessing the appearance of a new phenomenon on the world stage. Many critics attacked the PESC for supposedly failing to notice that capitalism had been around long before the Puritans came on the scene. Those critics failed to notice that Weber made it clear he was talking only about *modern* capitalism, which had taken on an entirely new character, starting between the sixteenth

⁴ First published *Bulletin SEDEIS*, number 905, Supplement number 1, December 20, 1964. Republished by *Intura*, June, 2004. <http://www.lhoumeau.com/w/Intura/www/fonds/j-ellul/maxweber-lethique.htm>

⁵ *The Technological Society*, Vintage paperback edition, p. xxvii.

and seventeen centuries. As the Weber scholar Stephen Kalberg put it, “The distinction between ‘capitalism’ and ‘modern capitalism’ stands at the foundation of Weber’s entire analysis in PESC.”⁶

Similarly, Ellul noted that technique existed in traditional societies but that it mingled in those societies with “numerous and diversified elements” of which technique was only one. It wasn’t until modern times that technique became the dominant factor, and thus assumed a new personality – one of his maxims, borrowed from Hegel, was that at some point a change in quantity becomes a change in quality. “The characteristics we have examined permit me to assert with confidence that there is no common denominator between the technique of today and that of yesterday,” Ellul wrote. “Today we are dealing with an utterly different phenomenon.”⁷

3. Rationality. Perhaps the key difference between traditional and modern manifestations of technique and capitalism, Weber and Ellul agreed, was the modern emphasis on rationalism and its methodological agents, calculation and abstraction, all in service of operations that emphasize efficiency, order and control. Specialization and standardization were other tools of rationalism that enhanced predictability and thus manageability, sacrificing a breadth of perspective and openness to ingenuity in the process. “In technique,” Ellul wrote, “whatever its aspect or the domain in which it is applied, a rational process is present which tends to bring mechanics to bear on all that is spontaneous or irrational...Every intervention of technique is, in effect, a reduction of facts, forces, phenomena, means, and instruments to the schema of logic.”⁸

Weber and Ellul both identified bureaucracy as one of rationality’s most characteristic and most corrosive offspring. Weber described the typical bureaucrat as an “animated

⁶ Kalberg, introduction to his translation of the PESC, p. xvii.

⁷ *The Technological Society*, p. 146.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

machine” as opposed to the inanimate machines in factories. During a conference in 1909 he spoke of his fear that “bureaucratization” threatened to stifle the vitality of modern society. It is as if, he said, “we intentionally were to become people who need order and nothing but order, who get nervous and cowardly when this order becomes shaky for a moment, who become helpless when they are torn out of their exclusive adjustment to this order.” The question, he concluded, “is what we have as a *counterpoise* to this machinery so as to keep a remnant of humanity free from this parceling out of the soul, from this exclusive rule of bureaucratic ideals of life.”⁹

4. Unbrotherliness. One of the most troubling characteristics of rationalism as it tends to be expressed in modern capitalism and technique, Weber and Ellul agreed, is its aggressive impersonality, which readily translates into inhumanity. Expanding their dominance and scope of influence are the driving, single-minded concerns of technique and capitalism; religious values such as benevolence, charity and compassion are often seen as counterproductive in those pursuits. Despite the fact that he had no personal commitment to religious faith, Weber railed often against this absence of moral concern. “The more the world of the modern capitalist economy follows its own immanent laws,” he wrote, “the less accessible it is to any imaginable relationship with a religious ethic of brotherliness.”¹⁰

Ellul devotes a chapter in *The Technological Society* to what he called “human techniques.” These are measures taken to assuage discontent among those troubled by the demands of technique, not out of concern for their well-being, but to avoid any significant disruption of operations. Their most obvious role is in large corporations or bureaucracies, where “human relations” departments have been introduced to, as Ellul put it, “integrate the human individual into the technical milieu.” Ellul extends the idea to “educational techniques,” which are designed to pre-integrate children, as it were, for

⁹ Marianne Weber recounts this speech in her biography of Weber, p. 416. *Italic in the original.*

¹⁰ Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber*, p. 331.

a productive future within that milieu. Various forms of amusement, distraction, medication and propaganda are employed, meanwhile, to pacify the population at large.¹¹

Both Weber and Ellul use the word “adaptation” to describe the transformation that human techniques and capitalism aim to complete. Both point out that, until Calvinism, the pre-industrial workday of the average person was leisurely compared to the regimens that became routine in factory and office life. In the beginnings of the shift from a predominately agriculture to a predominately urban culture, worker resistance to the rigidity of those routines was a problem for employers. Eventually they became the new routine, but, as Ellul and many others have pointed out, we continue to pay a substantial price for our submission. “Technique demands for its development malleable human ensembles,” Ellul wrote. A person blissfully adapted to the technological society would represent, he added, “a profound mutation.”¹²

5. The Iron Cage. Both Weber and Ellul have been accused of pessimism for suggesting that capitalism and technique have created an inescapable dystopia. If Weber is famous for anything outside of academia, it is for the phrase he used to describe that imprisonment: the Iron Cage. It appears in a concluding passage of the PESC and it is remarkable for the anger and despair it expresses, in part because emotional expression is a rarity in the vast corpus of Weber’s work. It’s worth quoting at length.¹³

“The Puritan wanted to work in a calling,” he wrote; “we are forced to do so.

For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into

¹¹ *The Technological Society*, Chapter Five and p. 143.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 207, 431.

¹³ Many scholars have noted that the phrase “the Iron Cage” is actually a mistranslation of what Weber wrote; his original German wording suggests that “steel-hard casing” or “a shell as hard as steel” would be more accurate, they say. This would seem to be one of those times when imprecision paid off. As the Weber scholar Peter Baehr put it, “The translation is questionable; its impact is undeniable.”

everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force.¹⁴

He refers at that point to one of the best-known Puritan divines, Richard Baxter, who wrote that the Christian saint should wear the cares and possessions of the world “like a light cloak which can be cast aside at any moment.” This was not what happened, Weber said. Instead, “fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.”

The passage concludes with this:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.”

Those last lines are reminiscent of the disdain for technicians Ellul expressed in *The Technological Society*. “Technicians are not very complicated beings,” he wrote. “In truth, they are as simple as their techniques, which more and more assimilate them.”¹⁵

¹⁴ PESC, p. 123.

¹⁵ *The Technological Society*, p. 389.

It's clear that to a large degree both Weber and Ellul see us, human beings, as victims of modernity's dystopia, but they also agree that we've collaborated in its construction by allowing ourselves to be seduced by the comforts it offers. "Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world," Weber said, "material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history." Note that he wrote that in 1905, when the engines of consumerism were just gaining momentum. Both Weber and Ellul noted the acceleration that has characterized the advances of capitalism and technique.¹⁶

As it did for Weber, the totality of our encirclement inspired some of Ellul's most angry and despairing prose. "Death, procreation, birth, habitat; all must submit to technical efficiency and systemization, the end point of the industrial assembly line," he wrote. Later in the book he added, "Man is caught like a fly in the bottle. His attempts at culture, freedom, and creative endeavor have become mere entries in technique's filing cabinet."¹⁷

Neither Weber or Ellul offered programmatic solutions for escape from the iron cage. Ellul put his faith in God and in the ethical thought and behavior of ethical people. He called for a recognition of limits (against technique's inherent inability to recognize limits) and the practice of an awareness that leads to "a movement of discernment and reclassification of the essentials" (against technique's inherent tendency to invalidate discernment and preempt classification of essentials). Again, Weber had no commitment to religious faith, although he insisted he was not irreligious. He placed his hope for the future on the will of the individual who as a realist was able to meet the challenges of his time, which doesn't seem entirely out of step with Ellul's suggestions. Both recognized the responsibility we all share to resist, both individually and collectively, the adaptation that technique and capitalism demand.¹⁸

¹⁶ PESC, p. 124.

¹⁷ *The Technological Society*, p. 128, 418.

¹⁸ Ellul, "Nature, Technique and Artificiality," *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, Vol. 3, 1980, p. 281-282.

