

*Jacques Ellul & the 21st Century Technological Society*

IJES Conference, Chicago, July 11-13, 2024

**Theology of Technique**

**Frédéric Rognon**

This conference commemorates the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of *The Technological Society*, which is the English translation of *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*, written in 1949 and published in French in 1954. The simple fact of the five-year gap between this book's writing and its publication demonstrates the extent to which Ellul's ideas were inaudible and of no interest to publishers. Thus, today we are also commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the completion of this text. In hindsight, we can see how the intuitions developed in this book were confirmed afterwards in our history, and remain just as relevant today as when they were written. The examples given by the author to illustrate his thesis are certainly dated, but the general trends which Jacques Ellul analyzed already in 1949 have only been amplified and generalized since.

It is also important to re-situate this book in the general economy of the Ellulian *oeuvre*. We know that *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* is the first part of a trilogy of books devoted to the technical phenomenon, followed by *Le Système technique (The Technological System)* and *Le Bluff technologique (The Technological Bluff)*. Gravitating around this three-part foundation are some thirty more specialized books, each detailing this or that dimension of the technological society: politics, art, the image, propaganda, social classes, revolution, etc. The ensemble of these books constitutes the sociological side of Jacques Ellul's work, with none of them speaking of the Bible or his Christian faith. The other side of his work is theological, biblical, and ethical, and is quantitatively equivalent to the first side (another thirty or so books on this side too), allowing our author to confess his personal faith and to present the reader with his own reading of certain biblical texts and understanding of Christian truths. The structure of this second side is more complex than the first. Even if there is a trilogy here—*Ethics of Freedom*, *Ethics of Holiness*, and *Ethics of Relationship* (or *Ethics of Love*)—on the one hand, this trilogy is preceded by a two-volume introduction (*To Will & To Do*). On the other hand, the first part of this trilogy is itself made up of two volumes in French (*Éthique de la Liberté et Les combats de la Liberté*); the second part of this trilogy (*Ethics of Holiness*) will only be published in French for the first time this fall, in two huge volumes under one title; and finally, the third part (*Ethics of Relationship*, or *of Love*) will never appear, since Jacques Ellul spoke of it but, alas, never had time to write any of it.

These two components of the architecture of Ellul's work are in no way separated or sealed off from one another. Ellul himself often affirmed that his entire project must be grasped as an "architecture in movement" (to borrow a formula from the subtitle of his commentary on the book of Revelation)—or more precisely, as a continual dialectical movement between the two sides, between the critique of the technological society in its various dimensions, and the confession of his faith and his hope, supported by mediations on Scripture and by biblical commentaries. Jacques Ellul describes this dialectic in various formulations. For example, in his interviews with Patrick Chastenot he says: "Hope is the connection between the two parts of what I have written, which corresponds to a kind of dialectical play in which hope is both the point of crisis and the way forward," (*Entretiens avec Jacques Ellul*, 1994, p. 41). And he clarifies: "If you only consider the theological dimension, you will lack the element of incarnation. If you are uniquely interested in the sociopolitical dimension, you will

constantly run up against an absence of response or opening.” (*ibid.*, 40). Indeed, it is because he was a Christian that he was able to observe and analyze the technological society in all its horror and its tragic impasses, without abandoning his research halfway through or committing suicide (on the same page as the citations above, he evokes suicide, since in the absence of God life has no meaning). Inversely, it is because he was a jurist, historian, and sociologist—that is, because he was concerned with facts and with real life—that his theology is everything but disincarnate, abstract; on the contrary, it is at grips with the daily realities of the women and men of today. On this topic, he further wrote: “**I describe a world without exit, with the conviction that God accompanies man throughout his entire history.**” (*ibid.*) Thus, even if each of his books is expressed either in a sociological or theological register, if we are to understand Ellul’s thought in its own logic, we must always read them in keeping the other side in mind. We can even try to establish correlations between each of his books on one side and on the other: for example, *The Politics of God and the Politics of man* forms a dialectical counterpoint to *The Political Illusion*; *The Humiliation of the Word* is a counterpoint to *Propaganda*; *Living Faith* is a counterpoint to *The New Demons*; *Hope in Time of Abandonment* is a counterpoint to *The Technological System*. And as for the book which we are celebrating today, it is undoubtedly the *Ethics of Freedom* which constitutes the dialectical and theological counterpoint.

To understand *The Technological Society* as the first moment in a dialectic which leads to the *Ethics of Freedom* is to set the order of necessity or determination, which is that of Technique, in tension with the regime of Freedom, which is that of Christian ethics. Technique is anything but Freedom. Ellul demonstrates this point in *The Technological Society* by speaking of the self-augmentation of technique: Technique proceeds without decisive human intervention, it is self-engendering and becomes exclusively causal, losing all teleology. Ellul also evokes this point in relation to the progression of techniques: they entail one another because the preceding technique renders the following technique necessary, with each innovation bearing irremediably within itself the conditions of determination for the emergence of the following innovation. Finally, Ellul places technique once again in the order of necessity as concerns its final characteristic, autonomy: Technique is independent of the economy, of politics, of finance, of morality, and of spiritual values. Humans rigorously cannot inflect its trajectory in the name of some other parameter. This anchoring of Technique in the order of necessity, and thus of anti-freedom, will be decisively reexamined in *The Technological Bluff*: the ‘bluff’ will consist precisely in calling technical progress a progress of freedom, when in fact it amounts to a regression of freedoms which are sacrificed on the altar of power and efficiency.

The dialectic between *The Technological Society* and the *Ethics of Freedom* will thus play on the tension between freedom and determination. By its very essence, Christian ethics is an ethics of Freedom. This freedom must be understood not as the ability to act without hindrance (as the current definition of the word would have it), but as liberation in Christ—that is, as this movement of liberation regarding oneself, in reliance on the God of Jesus Christ. The biblical God is at once the Wholly Other, absolutely transcendent to the world (and thus to the technological system), and the one who came to us by incarnating himself in Jesus Christ. It is precisely because he is at once Wholly Other and Wholly Near that he is capable of pulling us away from ourselves, of allowing us some distance from ourselves, and notably in relation to the grip which technical thinking maintains on our imagination. The ethics of Freedom thus means taking a critical distance vis-à-vis technical determinations. It is not about doing without all technique, but of putting Technique back in its place, of no longer making Technique a question of absolute finality, of bringing it down to the level of a simple means—in short, of de-absolutizing or desacralizing technique. This mention of a ‘sacralization’ of Technique, already present in *The Technological Society*, will play a decisive role in the dialectical reexamination of the question of Technique from the perspective of theology and

Christian ethics. If Jacques Ellul speaks neither of his faith nor his hope in *The Technological Society*, just as in all of his other sociological books, he has no trouble analyzing the sacral dimension of Technique for those around us in contemporary society. Technique is not a neutral material, something submitted to our moral or spiritual values and political choices. It has an eminently immaterial dimension, it is an impersonal power doted with its own force, and it provokes a mix of fascination and fear; in short, it has become sacred. It is the new sacred of the men and women of the post-Christian age. And the great paradox is that Technique is the vector of desacralization of the world *par excellence*. But since human beings cannot stop believing in something, humanity has reinvested the vector of desacralization itself with a certain sacrality. The new sacred is this power of efficiency, of speed, and of comfort promised by Technique. And this is precisely where we find the supreme alienation through sacralization. Whence this formula of Jacques Ellul in his book *The New Demons*: “It is not technique which subjugates us, but the sacred transferred onto technique.” This means that instead of placing technique at their service, human beings have made themselves the devoted servants of technique, all while believing that they maintain their mastery of it. Alienation is a synthesis of submission, of being dispossessed of oneself, and of complete illusion regarding one’s own condition. In the face of technique, our condition is one of servility, but we think of ourselves as all-powerful demiurges. Technophilia has transformed into technolatri as Technique has become our new idol. Sacralizing Technique means consecrating our life to it, sacrificing everything in our existence which is not Technique (our relationships, our imagination, our spontaneity, our spiritual life...). It is to consider all technocritical discourse to be sacrilege: ‘consecrate,’ ‘sacrifice,’ and ‘sacrilege’ are all concepts of the same semantic family as ‘sacred’ or ‘sacralize.’

Of course, this sacral dimension of Technique, which Jacques Ellul highlighted already in *The Technological Society*, will play a pivotal role in this dialectical play. For the theological and ethical evaluation of Technique will be based precisely on this sacral characteristic, which touches on religiosity. If on the one hand the sociological side of the Ellulian *oeuvre* never mentions God, faith, or hope, on the other hand, in its dialectical reevaluation, the theological and ethical side of his work refers abundantly to Technique, as to the State, to power, to politics or propaganda, etc. This situates the field of application of Christian ethics in an extremely concrete manner and allows us to derive practical consequences in these aspects of daily life. The Ellulian theology of Technique can be summarized in two fundamental principles: first, Technique is the means by which man has developed to do without God, and second: as a logical consequence of the first principle, a Christian ethic which seeks to be faithful to the God of Jesus Christ will place a significant priority on transgressing (or more precisely, profaning) the sacred of technique. It is indeed a matter of profanation, since the Christian ethical gesture *par excellence* amounts to removing every sacral aura, every absolutization, and all postures of veneration towards Technique. In the technological society, the complex of sacralization of Technique has a name: that of “Gabor’s law,” formulated by the technocritical Hungarian physicist Dennis Gabor (1900-1979), recipient of the Nobel Prize in physics in 1979. This law is formulated as follows: “Whatever can be technically realized will be realized.” Whatever might be the financial, social, human, ethical, or spiritual costs, Technique thus presents itself as the steamroller of our lives before which no resistance can hold up. It is thus the absolute determination, the iron law of human history. It is in this sense that Christian ethics aims to be a profanation of the law of Gabor. Christian ethics contests the absolute necessity of this law, contests its status as an “irrefutable” law; it refuses all fatality and all resignation before this so-called fatality; it thus seeks to “de-fate” history, to free history from all fate-like determinations.

Against this orgy of power set in motion by the adventure of technique, and against this exacerbation of efficiency—which has become the supreme value, the altar on which we sacrifice every other

value—in short, against what we might describe as the jealous monotheism of Technique—Christian ethics presents itself as an ethics of “non-power.” Modeled on the notion of ‘non-violence,’ Jacques Ellul has effectively forged a new concept—that of “non-power.” Ellul sets up a dialectic between three terms: power, powerlessness, and non-power. Power is the capacity to do something; powerlessness is incapacity to do something; and non-power is the capacity to do something and the choice to not do it. Or, said differently, non-power is refusing to do everything that we can do—“*even in the interest of defending one’s own life,*” he specifies. Non-power thus has nothing to do with powerlessness. Jesus, as all-powerful God, adopted an attitude of non-power, and not only of non-violence: when he asks John the Baptist to be baptized by him; when he refuses to accomplish certain miracles which are not oriented towards life and love but only towards the expression of his omnipotence; when, at the moment of his arrest, he does not call upon legions of angels to help him; and when he resists those who tell him to come down from his cross. In all these examples, Jacques Ellul sees Jesus applying his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: “Love your enemies.” Following Christ, Christians are thus invited to take a path of non-power: a path of discernment among all the possibilities before us, and of choice, choosing those which are connected to life and love, but not to power for the sake of power. And this is a direct profanation of Gabor’s law. Now, living in the technological society which Ellul described in this book, we have become extremely powerful: we are capable of accomplishing through Technique what Jesus accomplished through miracles. And transhumanists currently promise us victory over death in the next thirty years—that is, our accession to omnipotence.

But in fact, Jacques Ellul invokes this principle of non-power when he lays out the diverse facets of that which (according to the Gospels) is the most contrary to human nature, while trying to explain the vectors of the “subversion of Christianity”. He writes: “**What about this other idea which seems essential to us in the life of Jesus Christ, that of non-power, which is connected with antipolitics. What could be more contrary to what we are?**” Indeed, “The spirit of power is the heart of man. How truly intolerable then is a preaching, to say nothing of a life, centered on non-power! Not the sacrifice for a cause which we would like to see victorious, but truly a love for nothing, a faith for nothing, a gift for nothing, a service for nothing! Consider others as greater than yourselves; in all things seek the good of others. If you are brought before the judge, do not seek to defend yourselves, the Holy Spirit will take care of it. Non-power is infinitely more difficult and extensive than non-violence (which it contains). For non-violence implies a social theory, and generally has an objective: non-power, period.” (*The Subversion of Christianity*, - )

The relations between non-power and non-violence thus resemble concentric circles, since non-violence is described as “contained” within non-power. And yet, the choice of non-power “does not exclude an accidental act of violence.” In *Theology and Technique*, Jacques Ellul clearly delineates his position on this topic:

“The latter is obviously included in the former, but is not identical with it. For people have wanted to make non-violence a strategy or a tactic to win a political struggle. There again, we are facing a triumph of the technical spirit: bringing the non-violent to justify themselves by proving that non-violence is efficient and can earn successes. That may be legitimated at a political level, but one must be aware that this is subscribing to the technical system. It is admitting that what does not succeed is not efficient, has no value! Hence the fragility of the position: if, to obtain a given result, non-violence pays, we use it; if not, we enter violence. And this concern for efficiency is always what brings about a crisis in non-violent movements and ends up with the non-violent group being overtaken by a violent wing.

If we try to show, thanks to Gandhi, that we succeed in defeating the adversary, we bring back non-violence to a technique among others (a soft one to be sure!) that must therefore obey the technical spirit of success and efficiency. It is admitting that we cannot convince the men of our society otherwise than through a proof of efficiency, and that telling them “Of course, it is not efficient (so what?), but it is good, just and true,” has no value! It is indeed entering the technical system whose spirit of power is the norm and the criterion of the values recognized by all. Thus, non-power puts an end to all these misunderstandings. It is true that it is not efficient, and for that very reason it is the only path that is critical of the technical system. All the rest is idle playthings.” (*Theology and Technique*, p. 245 [trans. Christian Roy]).

Concretely, non-power consists in profaning Gabor’s law, in not pursuing all the technical innovations which we could pursue when we are uncertain as to their effects. But everyone can put non-power into practice in their daily lives: in limiting the speed of their car, in refusing professional competitiveness, in applying a pedagogy of cooperation rather than of competition with their children (or with their students)... And Ellul unhesitatingly proclaims: “Today, only non-power has a chance to save the world...” (*Ce que je crois*, p. 201)

2024 is not only the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of *The Technological Society* in English, but also the year of publication of the translation of *Theology and Technique*, ten years after its 2014 French publication. This book, which Ellul had completed but which he did not manage to publish during his lifetime (which is thus a posthumous publication) bears the subtitle: “*Toward an Ethic of Non-Power*”. This book contains Ellul’s most extended discussions of the theme of non-power. But above all, its very title—*Theology and Technique*—indicates the book’s dialectical intention. It is thus a book which seeks to display the dialectic between the two sides of Ellul’s *oeuvre* within itself. 2024 thus contains an editorial event of decisive importance for the anglophone world, allowing for a better understanding of the very logic of the thought and work of Jacques Ellul. By placing *Technique* and *theology* in tension, but by beginning with the latter of this pair, Ellul reveals the very foundation of his approach to *Technique* in light of his faith and his hope. And to conclude, this book, *Theology and Technique*, will help us clarify just what kind of dialectic is at work in the *oeuvre* of Jacques Ellul.

Where does the Ellulian dialectic between sociology and theology, between critique of the technological society and a confession of faith and hope based on meditations upon Scripture, come from? What is its source of inspiration? It is not the dialectic of Socrates, which was far too limited to a language game without a clear impact in concrete life. Socratic or Platonic dialectic is too strictly conceptual to serve as the matrix of Ellulian dialectic. Nor is this Hegel’s dialectic. This latter proceeds by overcoming contradictions between two poles through the mediation of a third pole which reconciles the first two, rejecting that which opposes them and retaining what is compatible in them, in a superior stage of history. As a result, history is conceived as a kind of progress, since the overcoming of contradictions guarantees an evolution which is always positive. Jacques Ellul could not swallow this progressive vision; in his estimation, while there may be scientific or technical progress, there is no human or spiritual progress; man is still the same (fallible) man today as he was five centuries before Christ. The Ellulian dialectic is thus inspired by a third dialectical model, that of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s dialectic is a permanent movement which consists of enduring tensions, contradictions, oppositions, by way of a continual back-and-forth between the poles in tension. No way out is presented for going beyond these contradictions to a harmonious and non-conflictual higher synthesis. Life, and especially Christian existence, is made up of conflicts, for the Christian is composed of finite and infinite, of temporality and eternity, of relative and absolute. Transposed onto the technological society via the pen of Jacques Ellul, the Kierkegaardian dialectic becomes an

incessant movement between social critique and theological development, with each one pointing back to the other, feeding and feeding off of one another. The Christian life is a life of tension between determination by technique and an ethics of freedom, the subjugation and alienation by Technique continually at work and the process of liberation which must be renewed continually, reworked constantly. The roots of Ellulian dialectic are thus Kierkegaardian—that is, not a purely conceptual or historical dialectic, but an existential dialectic. Such is the foundation, in light of which we can better grasp the orientations of *The Technological Society*—this book which we take to be a masterpiece, but a piece among others, in the puzzle which the work of Jacques Ellul constitutes in its entirety and in the internal logic of its architecture.

**Frédéric Rognon<sup>1</sup>**

---

<sup>1</sup> Pastor in the French Reformed Church (Église Protestante Unie de France), Professor of philosophy in the Faculty of Protestant Theology at the University of Strasbourg (France), Director of the journal *Foi & Vie*, author of *Jacques Ellul. Une pensée en dialogue* (Labor et Fides, 2007, 2013<sup>2</sup>) ; *Génération Ellul* (Labor et Fides, 2012) ; *Le défi de la non-puissance. L'écologie de Jacques Ellul et Bernard Charbonneau* (Olivétan, 2020) ; *Jacques Ellul. Exister c'est résister* (Ampélos, 2022) ; *Pour comprendre la pensée de Jacques Ellul* (Olivétan, 2022) ; *Jacques Ellul aujourd'hui. Génération Ellul – Volume 2* (Labor et Fides, 2022) ; *Prier quinze jours avec Jacques Ellul* (Nouvelle Cité, 2023).