"Effective Resistance to Technology: Does Ellul Exclude Its Possibility?

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It is not unusual, indeed it's altogether commonplace, to see the introduction of a marvelous new technique or technological device greeted with a corresponding wave of social and political opposition. In early 19th century England (to cite a classic case) systems of industrial mechanization were vigorously opposed by groups of traditional workers, including the Luddites, who saw the new water powered devices as a threat to their human powered productivity. Later in the century one finds the use of a traditional agricultural tool – the horse driven plow – gradually replaced by the power driven tractor, a shift that spawned several decades of protests by farmers in the USA, many of whom preferred pushing the device behind their beloved old stallion. Over the decades since then one finds episodes of organized social resistance focused upon the introduction of a wide range of new technologies – electrical power, industrial machinery, mass communications, popular entertainment, medical applications, education at all levels, and a good many others.

In my own time a significant social rebellion in opposition to an emerging technological innovation was the anti-nuclear power movement, a mobilization that reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s. Over the years I've taken up several other attempts to propose alternatives for technological devices, systems and projects that seemed troubling in one way or another. In many cases, a key development in movements of anti-technological resistance was to suggest alternatives for ongoing projects in the planning or building technological systems regarded potentially harmful. A significant focus for thinking and activism during this period was, of course, the development of devices in renewable energy and environmentally friendly technologies overall as alternatives to both the damage caused by burning of fossil fuels and the dangers posed by domestic nuclear power.

The broader landscape of technology criticism and its political activism took shape at least three centuries ago, periods in which the arrival of new technological developments have sometimes been met with serious, organized forces of resistance and demands for creative, workable alternatives. My own home town, San Luis Obispo, California – not far from the coastal location of today's embattled Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power plant – was the site of an early outbreak of creative resistance. In the middle and late 18th century, European settlers in California brought their ways of building and living to the landscape. Especially notable were the Catholic missions built and populated by Spanish priests and their crews. Ultimately there were some 21 missions built up and down the California coast. Unfortunately, the talented Spanish settlers also engaged in a variety of oppressive practices – forced work, relocation and imprisonment for many of the indigenous people along with forced confiscation of lands where their peoples had lived for literally thousands of years. As an ingenious innovation of resistance, in 1770s Indian people of San Luis Obispo set fire to the straw roofs the new mission building and its surrounding structures. Of course, any possible benefit from that gesture was short lived as the priests rebuilt the structures, this time with roofs of clay shingles of the sort they'd known in Spain. One imagines that as the devout Father Junipero Serra, leader of the construction and religious worship campaign, walked north to launch several similar projects, he may have looked back upon the little village and proudly proclaimed, "Mission accomplished!"

The writings of Jacques Ellul on the problems for modern society brought by "la technique" and specific manifestations of its power would seem to offer a wealth of opportunities for organized resistance to the disturbances that the introduction of new technologies sometimes bring. His sweeping, deeply thoughtful vision of technique as well as his descriptions of the troubles for humanity that technical applications and their accompanying mindsets sometimes bring, obviously suggest openings for new visions, rebellions and counter measures. Indeed, there are moments in his writing in which prospects for active resistance to rapidly spreading technological projects seems to be uppermost in his thoughts. Thus, at the very conclusion to his Autopsy of Democracy he exclaims:

"We are torn between the lure of a vain political revolution and the necessity of a technological revolution against which, precisely, we must rebel. We need every spark of defiance and self-assertion we can muster, a new spirit wholly distinct from traditional individualism and from everything heretofore described as revolution. We have no legacy to fall back on; everything must be initiated."

It is conceivable that Ellul was aware that analyses of "technique" that move forward to propose specific practical alternatives run a risk of obsolescence as everyday institutionalized technological changes so quickly take shape. His highly abstract commentaries about the troubles that "technique" present to individuals and whole communities have a distinct advantage precisely because their lack of reference to specific settings, institutions and challenges of a given time. That feature of his writings means that the wisdom they offer will not be rendered obsolete as cultural and practical situations are gradually transformed. Indeed, the very lack of specific detailed technological and cultural references assures that Ellul's inquiries and will remain fresh and relevant whatever new devices, settings and social activities appear on modern society's horizons.

Nevertheless, a distinct problem in Ellul's broad ranging, insightful analyses of "la technique" appears at an important turning point in reflections of this kind. His insights do not achieve resolution within a focus upon specific practical, instrumentally focused resistance to innovations in the works or suggestions for creating significant alternatives. Thus, we do not find in his writing passages that advocate withdrawal from or abandonment of particular ongoing or proposed technological devices, systems and projects. Neither does he recommend lively opposition to technological initiatives looming on the drawing board. That is not the logical destination where his elaborate, deep seeking critique of technology ultimately leads.

His work illuminates the intellectual, spiritual, psychological and social dynamics of the ultimately monstrous cultural realm that technique involves for how we think, imagine and ultimately live. Much of his writing sketches an elaborate framework of observations and criticisms about how "la technique" continually leads modern societies and all of their citizens badly

astray. Thus, near the conclusion of The Technological Society he laments, "...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." In the end, however, his critique does not move forward from that remarkable accomplishment to suggest ways to imagine, plan or build more humane, less destructive, materially prominent alternatives to the technological accomplishments – large and small – that constitute the dominant forms of apparatus in modern society. Unfortunately, his readers are offered no well-focused strategy that might enable them to explore materially embodied alternatives for the host of nightmares in modern technological culture that he so clearly, powerfully describes (but in highly general terms).

In this context, it is important to take notice of the numerous of efforts – old and new – that have tried to pose alternatives to the troubling features of technology-out-of-control in modern society. Within institutions of education, for example, there have long been debates about which kinds of methods of teaching and learning, which array of proposed technical instruments – mechanical toys, voice tape recorders, motion picture projectors, laptop computers, and the like – can be justified as significant components in the teaching and learning of elementary and high school students.   Thus, in the present moment there is widespread debate about prospects that AI – systems of artificial intelligence of one kind or another – will infuse many institutions and practices of everyday life – industrial production, office work, medical procedures, television news, mass entertainment, and especially wide spread practices of education. As the debate unfolds, the focus upon inquiry, teaching and learning with AI at all levels from kindergarten to graduate school runs hot and heavy. In many ways, the very notion of what comprises a good eduction today is closely connected to widespread debates about the features, advantages and limitations of innovative digital technologies rather than any more general vision of the basic purposes and practices of education. Choices within this digital domain (we are urged to believe) is where the future of society depends.

Ellul's thoughtful philosophical writing about "la technique" and its consequences for how we live have little to offer as regards focused criticism of particular technological devices, systems and their promotion. Neither does he suggest or advocate particular, practical choices or alternative projects that might lead society and its decision-making activities to affirm significant, promising, workable alternatives on a broad scale. To be more precise, Ellul's broad ranging, insightful criticisms of "la techique" do not resolve in a focus upon practical, instrumentally focused resistance to innovations in the works, much less to any suggestions for significant alternatives. Thus, we do not find in his work passages that advise withdrawal from or abandonment of particular ongoing or proposed technological devices and systems. That is simply not where his elaborate, deep seeking critique of technique ultimately leads.

His work illuminates the intellectual, spiritual and social dynamics of the ultimately monstrous realm that technique involves for how we think, imagine, remember, and ultimately live. Much of his work sketches an elaborate framework of observations and criticisms about how the infection of "la technique" leads modern societies badly astray in countless ways. In the end, however, his critique does not move forward to suggest ways to imagine, plan or build more humane, less destructive, materially prominent alternatives to the technological accomplishments – large and small – that constitute the apparatus of modern society as a whole or the specific devices and systems that largely comprise the basis of how people who live in developed technological societies experience the conditions the possibilities for day-to-day existence. Once again, Elllul offers no materially embodied alternative (or set of alternatives) to the technological society he so clearly, powerfully describes and criticizes.

As one illustration, might think that the impressive works of theory and critical thinking of Jacques Ellul would find a good, strong home in today's discussions deliberations about AI and its manifold applications. One might even conclude that the thrust of Ellul's extensive discussion of the origins, development and consequences of the spread of "la technique" in modern society might offer an opportunity for lively, relevant thinking about the problems that artificial intelligence presents to our practices and institutions

as well as guidance for possible kinds of resistance to AI as well as pathways for creative alternatives in response. The problem is, however, that when it comes to applying Ellul's critical perspectives on "la technique" his own work gives few if any specific examples of specific devices, technological systems and applications that might demonstrate how his abstract, visionary categories and arguments might be applied, especially how "the necessity of a technological revolution against which, precisely, we must rebel" might be achieved in practice. It would be helpful to have some well focused, specific examples of what that rebellion would involve.

To be more precise, Ellul's broad ranging, insightful criticisms of "la technique" do not resolve within a focus upon practical, instrumentally focused resistance to innovations in the works or suggestions for significant practical alternatives. Thus, we do not find in his work passages that advise withdrawal from or abandonment of particular ongoing or proposed technological devices and systems. That is not where his elaborate, deep seeking critique of technique leads us.   His work illuminates the intellectual, spiritual and social dynamics of the ultimately monstrous realm that technique involves for how we think, imagine and ultimately live. Much of his writing sketches an elaborate framework of observations and criticisms about how "la technique" leads modern societies badly astray.   In the end, however, his brilliant critique does not move forward to propose ways to imagine, plan or build more humane, less destructive, materially prominent alternatives to the technological accomplishments – large and small – that constitute the basic apparatus of modern society as a whole or the specific devices and systems that largely comprise the basis of how people who live in developed technological societies experience the conditions and possibilities for day-to-day existence. Thus, Ellul offers no well planned, ingeniously fashioned, materially embodied alternatives to the technological society he so clearly, powerfully describes and decries.

A relevant comparison might be to the work of grand theory in the writings of Karl Marx. As you know, Marx found it crucially important to supplement his massive tome <u>Das Kapital</u> with shorter publications that map out what his readers and followers might actually do overturn the destructive realms of capitalism and build a much different, vastly improved society. Prominent

among such works was, of course, "The Communist Manifesto," written with Friedrich Engels.

One might say that, well, Ellul presents us with an exhilarating challenge for social and political action in technological settings, one that we ourselves must apply. That is probably true. My point is that Ellul himself does not take that step, the step of moving from brilliant abstract argument about general widespread phenomena to particular strategies and activities that might remedy the situation.

In the end, Ellul's investigations and interpretations of "la technique" and the human world it shapes and embodies amount to a vision of a particular, pungent variety or totalitarianism, one that seized and came to dominate the world about three and a half centuries ago. This manifestation pf totalitarianism is ultimately more powerful and invasive than, say, communism, fascism or Nazism, although such dreary modes of belief and practice are obviously included in the more malevolent forms of technological civilization that dominate modern politics, economics and social control.

In Ellul's understanding, the tools, techniques, and useful technology-based modes of activity in earlier periods of Western civilization -- the building of structures and whole cities, the construction of sailing ships, the methods of agriculture, and such like -- were fairly widespread in antiquity and the Middle Ages. His examples about such matters call attention to the ingenuity and usefulness of such tools, methods and even large scale projects. But, he notes, throughout much of the history Western culture, these accomplishments were typically regarded as separate and disconnected one from the other and not part of any overwhelming, world unifying system of technical devices. Thus, Ellul ponders the contributions of Leonardo da Vinci, the a great fifteenth century thinker and technical innovator. "Leonardo da Vinci invented a prodigious number of useful devices (the alarm clock, the silk-winder, a machine for carding textile fabrics, and so on) and proposed many technical improvements (double-hulled ships, the universal joint, conical gears, etc.) Why did none of these inventions and improvements find practical application?"

Ellul's complex answer here emphasizes the arrival of the scientific revolution from the early seventeenth century and onward, an intellectual and practical development the enabled previously scattered accomplishments to consolidate within a framework of reliable principles and interconnected practices. This powerful step eventually penetrated literally ever corner of modern life, every activity, every institution, every mode of living that people came to depend upon. In short, these developments resulted in the dominance of "la technique" at the heart of modern civilization. Alas, an unfortunate consequence of this development, in his view, was that it tended to replace (totally!) the separate, distinct, disconnected, lively ways of people being together found in traditional societies in the West and, ultimately, worldwide.

Even more calamitous in Ellul's vision is the way "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 techniques filing cabinet." (Tech. Soc. p. 418)

The ingenious devices that earlier inventors such as Da Vinci produced were primarily separate entities, not part of a larger, unified, systematic cultural whole. In Ellul's view, the turning point arrived in the 18th century with the powerful unification of thought, practice and organization that emerged as the distinctive mania of "la technique" -- a phenomenon that he describes and explains as an unprecedented totalitarian obsession, one that eventually penetrated literally ever corner of modern life, every activity, every institution, every mode of living that people depend upon.
An implication of this totalitarian monstrosity – that quest to identify and realize alternatives in whatever realm of thinking and practice one might choose – the quest was now thoroughly dominated by the mentalities and cultural obsessions of la technique. An implication of the total dominance of this vast cultural transformation is that it precludes separate, distinct, disconnected ways of being altogether.

In stark contrast, the ingenious devices that earlier inventors such as Da Vinci crafted were primarily separate entities, not part of a larger, unified,

systematic cultural whole. In Ellul's view, the turning point arrived in the 18th century with the powerful unification of thought, practice and organization that emerged as the distinctive mania of "la technique" -- a phenomenon that he describes and explains as an unprecedented totalitarian obsession, one that eventually penetrated literally ever corner of modern life, every activity, every institution, every mode of living that people depend upon. An implication of this totalitarian monstrosity is that quest to identify and realize alternatives in whatever domain of thinking and practice one might choose, any such quest was now thoroughly dominated by the mentalities and cultural   obsessions of la technique.   An implication of the total dominance of this vast cultural transformation is that it precludes separate, distinct, disconnected, spontaneous ways for humans to live and interact.

Elul's experience and understanding of this deplorable state of affairs is directly connected to another feature of his experience and vision of the world, his intense engagement with Christian spirituality. At a point in his thinking and writing where he might have sketched alternatives to the pervasive totalitarian regime of "la technique" in modern society, he moves instead to discuss his views on religious experience, most notably his conviction that a person's salvation ultimately depends upon a sincere, thorough-going belief in Jesus Christ, His teachings and inspiration as presented in The Bible.

In summary, he observes: "Seeing this reality as it is, the technique that I have tried to depict, could truly be paralyzing and discouraging, and could lead to despair. But it is precisely here that the Revelation, accepted in faith, can bring promise, hope, and liberation. It brings promise in the sense that no matter how mad history may appear to us, it is situated within God's promise and it does lead to the Kingdom of God. It brings hope in the sense that this certainty permits us to live here and now."
(Perspectives, 2nd ed., p. 86)

In my view, the ultimate purpose of Ellul's writing on "la technique" is to offer highly general gems of wisdom to his readers, with the implied strong message: Here, folks, is my overview – well-argued and distinctly relevant

to your own situation, hopes and worries. What you choose to make of it –
that is strictly up too you.