Tool & Technology:
A Comparative Reading of Illich & Ellul on Technique

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Introduction

I would like to start by saying a few words about my personal relations with these two thinkers who have had a profound impact on my own thinking as much as on my life.

As some of you already know, starting in 1974, I have been a student of Ellul's at Bordeaux's Institute of Political Science, and from 1978, his assistant in courses aimed at students from California and Colorado. Finally, I interviewed him from 1981 to April 1994, that is, three weeks before his death. These interviews, preceded by a biographical chapter, were published in book form as *À contre-courant*, translated as *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Technology and Christianity*.

I told the story of my two personal encounters with Ivan Illich last year in my book *Les Racines libertaires de l'écologie politique* (2023).

In February 1984, he was coming back to France for the first time since the famous Bobigny trial of 1972. Illich was immensely popular in the early seventies and had come to support the famous lawyer, anticolonialist activist and feminist Gisèle Halimi, charged with aiding and practicing abortions. I taught at Sciences Po Bordeaux at the time, but I often wrote op-eds in the local daily *Sud-Ouest*. My interview was published, with a first-page hook, under the title: "I would never presume to say, 'Long Live the Crisis!'" *Vive la crise !* was the title of a TV broadcast with big production values, hosted by actor and singer Yves Montand. We spent the day with a friend of Ellul, Édouard Kressmann, the secretary of the European ecological association ECOROPA, and we accompanied Illich to Sciences Po so he could give a lecture.

In November 1993, still at Sciences Po Bordeaux, Illich opened our international conference devoted to Ellul, whose proceedings were published under the title *Sur Jacques Ellul* (1994). In Ellul's presence, Illich paid him tribute, expressing his gratitude, and called him "Maître Jacques", repurposing as respect for his master a French idiom from a Molière play for a jack-of-all-trades. To quote Illich: Ellul "crucially inflected my path of the last thirty years".

Illich, much more famous in France and around the world than Ellul, claimed that day that he had only been following in Ellul's footsteps and carrying his insights further.

The connection was thus clearly claimed. I would like to specify what was Jacques Ellul's insight before seeing what Illich did with it. I will finally examine what unites them at the ethical and political level.

Illich gives thanks to Ellul for having ushered him into the realm of the analysis of Technique in 1965, as a result of reading *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (1954), in its 1964 translation as *The Technological Society*.

I. **Jacques Ellul as a thinker of Technique and Technological Society**

What is Ellul's insight? Modern man thinks he is using Technique when it is he who serves it. Once its master, he has become its slave. It is not a philosophical proposition, valid everywhere and always. It is a sociological finding that is only valid for modern Technique. To be understood as the one in force in Western societies starting from World War I. For the "Great War" appears as the first "total war", the one that justifies the mobilization of the social whole (economics, education, arts, Churches, health, justice, etc.) which abolishes the distinction between the civilian realm and the military realm, civil society and State society. A combination of the Leviathan State with technological power. There is no going back! Growth of the State, growth of Technique.

The idea that Technique, originally a vector of emancipation, becomes a factor of alienation. Technique, a vector of desacralization (the famous "disenchantment of the world") becomes the object of a new sacred, within the framework of a civilization of means and no longer of ends. To speak like Bernanos and no longer like Ellul, in industrial society, man has become "the instrument of his instruments". Twentieth-century Western man has become the tool of his tools, it is an image and a reasoning that have found an echo in Illich's œuvre.

For Ellul, Technique cannot be reduced to the machine since it encompasses in its definition both the material and the immaterial. Nor is it a mere intermediary between man and his environment, nor even a product of science, but <u>the search for the one best way in every area</u>.

Ellul makes a distinction between a technical phenomenon and technological progress.

The <u>technical phenomenon</u> is defined by ten features, among which are rationality, artificiality, universalism, autonomy, to name but a few.

<u>Technical progress</u> is not, for Ellul, the sum total of innovations resulting from science, but is defined instead by four features: self-increase, automatism, the absence of ends, and ambivalence.

Automatism does not mean repetition in the sense of an automatic weapon, but that Technique automatically absorbs new realms. Everything that can be done must be done. See Gabor's Law.

Ambivalence means that from the moment modern Technique became a legitimation system, it became impossible to say that Technique is like Aesop's tongue: the best of things and the worst of things. Or to use for it the metaphor of the knife that can be used to cut a lambchop or to kill one's neighbour. From the moment technical progress takes place within the technical system, in technological society, we cannot just take the "good" side. Individual cars without traffic jams, without pollution, the pillage of soils for *rare earths*, and the destruction of the planet. There too, we can see what could have caught Illich's attention.

Technical progress is thus ambivalent since it frees us as much as it alienates us. Always both, inextricably. Ellul ascertains four facts:

1. any technical progress must be paid for, for there is no absolute gain, what is new is not always equivalent or preferrable to what is eliminated, i.e., in matters of health, quietness, pollution, biodiversity, beauty of landscapes, silence, etc.

2. technical progress raises far greater issues than the ones it resolves because its negative effects are often irreversible; it is impossible to dissociate the problems that are solved by Technique from those that it spawns (i.e., we know the dangers of oil, gas and nuclear, but all energy sources have drawbacks).

3. negative effects are inseparable from beneficial effects, meaning that the same technique entails multiple effects that do not all go in the same direction (i.e., the faster and / or the more powerful a machine is, the graver the consequences of an accident, as in the case of nuclear reactors. The individual car was welcomed as a wonderful tool of freedom but has become a tool of alienation and destruction. This is a topic studied by Illich in *Energy and Equity* (1974).

4. Technical progress has unforeseeable effects. The growth of technical progress goes along with that of the unforeseeability of its effects. With nuclear power, "we live among volcanoes." The question is not that of knowing whether there will be an accident, but where and when?

Finally, technical progress creates problems as soon as it solves any (like plastic) and increases on its own through the solutions it brings (like IT).

This is just a crude summary of a reasoning that unfolds over some forty years and over a thousand pages. What did Ivan Illich retain from it?

II- Ivan Illich, a thinker of technical tools and institutions

Illich pursues the same aim as Ellul by wanting to limit the growth of modern societies. To this end, he argues for limiting the power of "tools" and institutions "in a world of obviously limited resources". Ellul considered Technique to be the "stakes" ("*l'enjeu du siècle*") of the (XXth) century but Illich found the word *tool* to be simpler and more concrete than *technology*. The tool is a means we take to reach an end. Illich includes under this term objects such as a hammer or a ballpoint pen no less than a mode of production of goods and services such as a factory, a nuclear plant, a hospital, a school, a healthcare system or a transportation system.

Illich observes that attention had focused on the need to limit overconsumption of goods at the expense of the no less needful limitation of services. His social project of "convivial austerity" was also founded on the idea of "self-limitation" as opposed to "today's personal development" as much as to technological and State surveillance. His penchant for Greek mythology, particularly for the figures of Epimetheus and Prometheus, is inseparable from the theme of *hubris*, in other words of excess. Illich counters *hubris* with *tonos*, "right measure", in the sense of right proportion. His vision is fully compatible with Ellul's.

In the Christian tradition, Illich takes up the torch of Hugh of Saint-Victor, his twelfth-century "friend" as he calls him, the first theologian to interpret the Bible as an invitation to humans to use technique as a mere remedy and not as a means of domination over nature. As a result of having, out of curiosity, upset the balance of the universe, certain rules, the first man and woman had to learn to suffer from cold and hunger. Technique came to make up in part for what they had lost by ignoring what we would call today "environmental limits". As a consequence of the Fall, Technique plays a reparative role, but its applications are strictly limited. The tool can bring relief to disease as agriculture can improve the soil, but up to a certain point. Illich shared Hugh of Saint-Victor's modest vision that made the tool an expression of human weakness and not of his omnipotence. A viewpoint compatible with Ellul's.

In *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), Illich identifies five threats:

(1) Overgrowth threatens the right to the fundamental physical structure of the environment with which man has evolved. (2) Industrialization threatens the right to convivial work. (3) The overprogramming of man for the new environment deadens his creative imagination. (4) New levels of productivity threaten the right to participatory politics. (5) Enforced obsolescence threatens the right to tradition: the recourse to precedent in language, myth, morals, and judgment. I will describe these five threats as

distinct though interrelated categories all having in common a destructive inversion of means into ends.[1]

Tools for Conviviality reminds us that if Earth is our home, it is time we realized that human action threatens its existence. To save it, Illich writes, it is not enough to limit procreation, consumption and waste, but we must still get rid of the illusion that machines can work for us. Illich is perfectly conscious that the machine has not abolished slavery but only given it a new face. To borrow his words, "past a certain threshold, the tool, once a servant, becomes a despot". The means turns into an end. *Corruptio optimi pessima*. The corruption of the best is the worst, for it unleashes the worst. This maxim resonates with the theme of the "subversion" – in the sense of adulteration and degradation – of Christianity in Ellul's work. School unteaches, the Hospital makes sick, the transportation system paralyses traffic.

There too, Illich is highly consonant with "Maître Jacques". The Ellulian concept of Technique incidentally allowed him, he explained in Bordeaux in 1993, to pinpoint exactly when services provided "conceptually and physiologically" absorbed the client into the tool. Illich counters heavy technology, produced by industrial civilization, with the cheerful selection, collectively decided, for low-tech, low-energy solutions. Walking and biking rather than the car!

Let us recall here that conviviality has little in common with the pleasant social vibe suggested by the French word, that of a birthday party or a sending-off event. For Illich, conviviality is individual freedom realized in production relations within a society endowed with efficient tools. *The tool is convivial* to the extent that anyone can use it with ease, as often or as rarely as he wants, to ends that he determines himself. The use that everybody makes does not in fact impinge on another's freedom to do the same. Nobody needs a degree to have the right to use it.

Let us recall that over the years 1975-1980, Ivan Illich goes from notoriety to anonymity, as well as from politics to metapolitics.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, I would like to underline another aspect that brings Illich close to Ellul, who for his part was of the opinion that anarchism was "the political

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[1] Ivan Illich - *Tools for Conviviality* http://clevercycles.com/tools_for_conviviality/ 58 of 126 10/11/07 9:20 AM

expression that is most compatible with the Bible", as he wrote in *Anarchie et christianisme* (1988). If Ellul was an avowed anarchist, Illich was an anarchist who did not know he was one. For with Illich as with Ellul, the issue is, always and everywhere, freedom and emancipation.

Like Ellul, Illich always starts "from below", to use Kropotkin's phrase, that is, from the situation of the user, the dweller or the individual at the end of the chain. The model of a "convivial society" he puts forward rests on the sense of limits and balance: two essential concepts of both anarchist theory and ecologist theory that we find in the thought of Ellul and his friend Charbonneau.

A balanced society enables the rooting of humans in their environment, the right to autonomy in action, creativity, political speech, support on established uses. If we are right to present ecological theory as a heterogeneous body of thought, we may however point out that it is mostly "a thinking of limits", according to political scientist Andrew Dobson. And this feature is also true of anarchism. Now, the notion of limits is consubstantial to Illich's thought. It flows through all of his work. It holds a central place in his ontology, for it defines man as the only animal who knows his own limits and accepts them. Illich shows how, beyond a certain size, once a limit has been passed, an institution becomes counter-productive. It fends off people from the goal for which it was designed more than it allows the public to take advantage of what it provides. The technoindustrial system is driven to excess by its own dynamics, since it organizes around the instability generated by indefinite growth and the unlimited creation of new needs.

This is exactly Ellul's assessment, whom Illich wrongly accuses of "painting everything black". For they both tell us that we must never give up. There is always a little fire left under the ashes. There is nothing unavoidable about "technological fascism". Personal action and friendship are valued at the expense of alienated labour and compulsory consumption. At the end of his life, Illich comes to the conclusion that "the greatest service one can do to the world and our fellow humans is to change one's heart". Which is consonant with Ellul's "thinking globally, acting locally", as well as with the anarchist motto: "if you want to change the face of the world, start by changing your street".